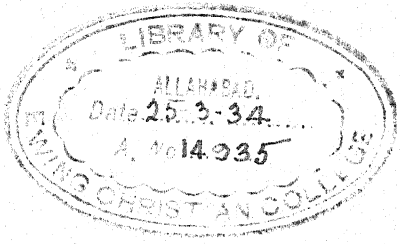
MR. SURDEZ knows North Africa as well as any man writing to-day, and he adds to his great knowledge of the country and its customs a fiery imagination, and a story-telling gift second to none. Beautiful women, brave men, gallant legionaries, modern warfare in ancient strongholds and hoary mountain fastnesses, mud houses, desert suns, lances and wild horses, noble chieftains and tricky whites—here are all the makings of adventure. In Mr. Surdez's skilful hands they become elements in a swift, sparkling story, keen, clean and health-giving to the tired mind.

THE DEMON CARAVAN

by

GEORGES SURDEZ



250

LONDON 48 PALL MALL
W. COLLINS SONS & CO LTD
GLASGOW SYDNEY AUCKLAND

This is the Story

MR. SURDEZ knows North Africa as well as any man writing to-day, and he adds to his great knowledge of the country and its customs a fiery imagination, and a story-telling gift second to none. Beautiful women, brave men, gallant legionaries, modern warfare in ancient strongholds and hoary mountain fastnesses, mud houses, desert suns, lances and wild horses, noble chieftains and tricky whites—here are all the makings of adventure. In Mr. Surdez's skilful hands they become elements in a swift, sparkling story, keen, clean and health-giving to the tired mind.



THE DEMON CARAVAN

by

GEORGES SURDEZ

LIBRARY OF
ALLAHABAD.
Date 25.3.34
A. No 14935
CHRISTIAN COLLEGE

250



LONDON 48 PALL MALL
W. COLLINS SONS & CO LTD
GLASGOW SYDNEY AUCKLAND

Copyright, 193

Printed in Great Br

CHAPTER I

AGAINST the luminous sky stained by the crimson flush of sunset loomed the great Tabelkala Cliff, closing the southern horizon like a wall. A sheer surge of ochre and red rocks, on which the last slanting rays of the vanishing sun cast shadows as on an immense screen. Below, already dimmed, spread the white walls of the French Fort, the green mass of the palm oasis, the ruins of an old Berber fortress. North, east and west unfolded the nude, grim plateau, still glowing with the heat of mid-afternoon.

A bayonet glistened near the North Gate, flashed with each stride of the sentry, in monotonous jerks, mechanical as the ticking of a clock, punctuated by the occasional sharp ring of a scabbard. Minutes passed, vultures drifted overhead pursued by their shadows flitting along the ground. From the west blew the first faint gust of the cool night wind.

Then, like the voice of the brief twilight, a grave, virile chant rose from a hidden courtyard, the call to the Fourth Prayer.

"La—ila—illa—Allah——"

The sun was gone. The shadows on the cliff submerged the last brilliantly lighted boulder tip, and a single formidable black mass barred the sky. The chant ended. In the east appeared the thin crescent of the moon.

.

Paul Lartal, on the terrace of the officers' quarters, was stirred by the profession of faith in a religion not

his own, as by a welcome. He had been roving Moslem Africa for ten years, from Mediterranean to Niger. Long experience in the Sahara, recent successes in the Sudanese Sahel, had won him the coveted assignment; to command the Tabelkala camel-corps unit, stationed in the outpost to check the activities of the Berber raiders.

His new commander, Captain Vasil, had guided him to the terrace to absorb in comfort the pre-dinner drinks.

"Devil take me," Vasil mused, "if I expected to see you out here."

Lartal lighted a cigarette. The flaring match revealed a gaunt tanned face, gray eyes under heavy brows, a high forehead framed in crisp black hair. A humorous smile fleetingly replaced the stern set of the lean cheeks.

"Why not?"

"You were doing well in the Sudan."

"Tired of it. Asked to come to the Saharan Companies. A man always returns to his first love."

"A saying more respected for age than truth," Vasil stated. He shifted his short, compact body in the canvas chair. "By the way, I'm sorry for my seeming neglect of you. I perform the duties of doctor out here. Lieutenant Brangin, your second, is ill."

"Serious?"

"Broken leg. Touch of sun. Fell off his camel, or rather fell with it. A long yarn." Vasil laughed softly: "He has a reputation for such scrapes. Hero of a dozen fantastic adventures. This time he left to chase a bunch of raiders, came back minus three men, with his camels fagged out, his leg broken. Naturally, that needs considerable explaining. He's the boy to do it, though."

" You've approved his report ? "

" Surely. He's a nice fellow, too nice to let down. A queer yarn but it covered all angles. In any case, can't be checked up. Happened near the Iraouen Mountains."

" As a matter of fact, they're far from the beaten track."

Halef, Arab orderly, appeared. He placed a tray bearing bottles and glasses on a small table. Vasil mixed the drinks, dosed his absinthe with filtered water according to ritual, performed a like duty for Lartal.

" First, let's get to an understanding, old man," Vasil resumed. " I am your senior in rank by a couple of months. Nominally, you are under me. I know I can't teach you anything of the desert. What you do shall be well done."

" Understood," Lartal agreed.

" The camel-corps is your concern. I have enough to handle with the infantrymen, a poor lot, scrapings of the Algerian *Tirailleurs* whom no one else wished to have. I'll turn over to you all official orders regarding your job, without comment."

" Thanks."

" You won't thank me when you realise what you're up against. The natives around here, same breed that cut up the Foreign Legion at El Moungar, believe they can lick the world."

" How do they operate ? "

" Small groups."

" Mobile, elusive "—Lartal said thoughtfully. " With Brangin unfit for service, that leaves me alone——"

" There's another European, Sergeant Perez. Spaniard, couple of years in the Legion, naturalised French. Good record."

"Was he with Brangin in his last scrape?"

"Yes. Says the same thing. To be expected, they're friends. Everyone likes Brangin, for that matter. You'll understand when you meet him."

"The raiders he went after—what tribes?"

"Ait Khebbashes. Ten of them. Killed a courier from Beni-Abbes a few miles north, wounded two guards with him. A caravan picked up the survivors, brought them here. Brangin and his thirty-five men were just back from a long jaunt, but he was willing to start out again. I was eager to recapture the camels taken, as they bore our brand and would be proof we could not take care of our own beasts. Brangin was out within three hours. He came back a month later, that is two days ago.

"Without the stolen camels, I'll warrant?"

"Wrong. He lost four camels, but brought back the three taken from the courier."

"I don't understand."

"What will you say when you hear that all the raiders were killed, although Brangin failed to come within range of them?"

"That's—more than strange."

"We'll go into that later. First, I think you ought to know the general situation. I'll outline briefly: Before we came this oasis was used by all raiding bands. Here they halted to fill their water-skins, before going farther north, near the caravan routes between Kerzaz and Bouda. When the French became convinced of the necessity of an occupation of the Western Sahara, a few soldiers were placed in that old Berber fortress, originally erected by men from Tafilalet. It was proved to everybody's satisfaction that the group was too small, when it was wiped out by a powerful gathering of confederated tribes.

" The engineer decided on this spot for the Fort. Out of effective range from the crest of the cliff, it dominates the oasis. We have at present within these walls, beside your thirty-odd riders, eighty-five native infantrymen, bolstered by four European noncoms. In the round protuberances emerging from the enclosing wall lurk two machine-guns and a quick-firer. Once a month a courier comes from Beni-Abbes with mail, orders and official blame. Every six months, a supply convoy brings our rice, wheat, coffee, etc., under the guard of irregular cavalry.

" As for your work : We will presume for example that a raiding band has attacked a caravan. The camel-men have bravely emptied their rifles, bowed to the will of Allah, been captured or massacred according to the mood of the attackers. News reaches Igli, which immediately informs Beni-Abbes. The officer there thinks the raiders have gone westward and notifies us. I read the dispatch, give it to you with my blessing.

" You start. You run here and there, seeking trace of the culprits, alert and eager for the fray. One bit of information sends you in one direction. Another causes you to retrace your steps. By sheer luck you catch up with the fellows, jockey your bunch into attacking position. Five minutes of combat and you know you are up against it—or the others know. If the band is strong, you need no advice. The survivors, if any, inform me, and I inform Igli.

" If you win the raiders scatter, each man going in a different direction. One man travels swifter than a detachment. You give up and come back. Behind you the raiders, who have gathered at an appointed meeting place, hold their sides with

laughter. I report your deeds to Headquarters. A month passes. Two. Then we get a letter asking what is being done with the mobile group at our disposal, that our inaction is lowering French prestige from Tripoli to Morocco. You curse, and wait for the next time."

"Charming," Lartal said.

"In the intervals you enjoy my company. You eat the tasty dishes supplied you by Bokar, the cook. You smoke as long as your tobacco lasts. For amusement, you listen to singing from the native line. Every fourteenth of July the flag is hoisted with great ceremony, the garrison is passed in review, athletic games organised. At the Aid-Kebir, the great Moslem feast, you eat mutton. The rest of the time you whistle when happy and ride Sergeant Perez or another noncom when sad. Another drink?"

Lartal smiled, and nodded: "The usual routine."

"Yes. Come on down to the dining-room with me now."

Vasil led the way down the outer stairway, passing through a spacious veranda on the second floor. A skinny mulatto lad served dinner; sardines, slices of beef, egg salad. Vasil unlocked the wine closet for the occasion. When the coffee was served, flanked by a bottle of Cognac and one of Benedictine, he sent Halef to summon Perez.

The sergeant arrived quickly, saluted. Perez was a short, broad-shouldered man, swarthy and muscular. His chest distended the tightly buttoned white tunic. on which his decorations gleamed. A puckered line of white near the mouth revealed that Perez had once fought Moroccans at close quarters. The red-rimmed eyes, the nose, evidenced a liking for the bottle.

"Sit down, Perez, have coffee with us," Vasil invited after the introductions.

"Thank you, Captain." Briefly Perez reported the condition of the troop. "On the whole, Captain Lartal, they're a good lot," he concluded.

"Yet they had their noses put out of joint by the raiders last time out, didn't they?"

"With all due respect, Captain, I believe anybody's nose would have suffered."

Perez finished his coffee, rose and left tactfully. Lartal was favourably impressed.

"You say the sergeant backs Brangio's story?" he asked of Vasil.

"In every detail. The report was toned down at my suggestion." Vasil broke off, called the servant: "See if the lieutenant is awake."

"Why not let me read the report?" Lartal suggested.

"It's strong enough to send him under medical observation, but doesn't tell the whole story. I'll let you talk to him. Oh, lest I forget—I must prepare you for the Mountain Ruby——"

"The—*what?*"

"A beautiful woman, nothing less, Lartal——"

"I've heard of Brangin before. Always a woman mixed in somewhere. She's in love with him, of course?"

"All of that. He firmly believes his good looks alone saved the detachment."

"With some men that would be a slender thread on which to hang the fate of two-score men."

"By the way, don't scoff openly. He's touchy. Don't forget the man has been toted two hundred miles atop a camel, nursing a broken limb. Feverish——"

"Understood."

The boy re-entered the room.

"I wake Lieutenant, tell him you come, Captain."

The servant preceded the officers, carrying the lamp.

The lieutenant threw back the blankets at their entrance and sat up. His face seemed all skull, the skin shrunken on the bones, black eyes gleaming feverishly. When in good health, he must have been a rather handsome young man.

"Sorry I won't be able to do much for a couple of months, Captain Lartal," he said, after the introduction.

"Don't fret," Lartal advised. "We'll send you to Colomb-Bechar to have that leg properly set."

"Will that be necessary?"

"Wiser. Unfair to throw the responsibility on Captain Vasil."

"Right—" Brangin admitted. "You've seen the men, Captain?"

"No. I hope they don't bear me a grudge for replacing you."

"No danger. Several of them knew you, served under you in the Tibesti Company of *Meharistes*."

"If you don't feel too tired," Vasil put in, "I wish you'd tell Captain Lartal your story. He is not a desk officer, and will believe it. Moreover, solid facts may prove of need to him, should he go near the Iraouen Mountains."

"Keep away from them, Captain. They brought me bad luck."

"I'll try," Lartal promised smilingly.

"As for the story—" Brangin interrupted himself: "May I have a cigarette?"

Lartal held the match while Vasil piled pillows behind the lieutenant with solicitude. When two

men are isolated from others in the desert, they develop either strong hatred or deep friendship.

" We left Tabelkala," Brangin began, " each man carrying one hundred cartridges with a reserve of two hundred on the pack-camels. We passed the small well of Idern within two hours, changing direction, there for, according to both Captain Vasil and I, the raiders were not likely to pass close to our walls. My intention was to strike due north, hoping to encounter trace of their passage or to pick up information from roaming herders, catching the bunch on the return trip.

" We passed out of the dunes toward sundown of the second day, with the Guettara Hill plainly visible, five or six miles on our right. Herders had been reported in that vicinity by previous patrols. We pushed on until nine in the evening before camping, built fires as the night was so cold water froze on the ground. We had gone eight miles the following morning when a man was brought back by Perez.

" The advance guard had captured him. Stated his name was Mohammed, son of somebody or other, that he was a native of Tafilalet, returning home after a pilgrimage to Sidi bel Abbes. Pretty well mounted, camel worth two hundred francs at least. No weapons, save a dagger strapped to his saddle. Good-looking chap, thirty-two or so, intelligent. Denied knowing anything of the raiders we sought.

" Although he claimed to have been in Algeria, he did not have a single paper to prove it. I decided to keep him for a couple of days, on general principles. Explained to me he had first tried to avoid speaking with us because he had mistaken our men for bandits. When we made camp, he refused our hospitality, brewed his tea in his own brass kettle, ate alone.

"I was seated by the fire, trying to make head or tail of the map supplied me, when Perez came and said that the fellow guarding Mohammed wished to speak to me. The man, a raw-boned fool of a Chambaa, superstitious as they all are, rambled something to the effect that we had a holy man with us. I know the broad meaning of the term holy in an Arab's mouth. I was sceptical.

"The guard went on with his tale: Mohammed had asked him for fodder for his camel, and he had given him a sack of date-pits. After a while, Mohammed came back, protesting that his beast refused to eat the date-pits.

"At first glance, one might think he owned a fussy mount. I told the private so. Then I heard a brief lecture on the feeding of date-pits to camels. It seems the animal has no liking for date-pits, that they must be forced on him. The trick is to stuff a handful of pits into the mouth—which isn't the easiest thing in the world—hold the lips tightly shut until he swallows. You repeat until a reasonable ration has gone down. Later, the camel reconsiders, chews the date-pits as he chews his cud. Like many things, it's simple when one knows.

"Mohammed didn't know. The guard was convinced by this ignorance he was not from Tafilalet where all men know how to feed date-pits. Though he spoke the local dialect of Berber quite well, he was undoubtedly a city-bred Arab. Obviously, he had lied to me. But lying to a Christian is no proof of guilt. In fact, it is quite meritorious. Moreover, I failed to see what importance the incident could have. I dismissed the private and went to sleep.

"In the middle of the night, the guard awoke me. Mohammed had escaped. The private admitted having gone to sleep, after fastening a leather thong

to the man's leg, the other end wrapped around his wrist. Upon awaking, the thong was still on his wrist, but dangled loose when he stood.

"I found the sentries awake. They swore they had heard nothing, seen nothing. Strange that a man could crawl off on his belly without being seen, stranger that he could pack a camel and vanish. For some reason, the sentries had closed their eyes."

"You mean your men let him go intentionally?" Lartal asked.

"We know of those fellows only what they let us see. They'll serve us, fight for us, get killed for us. But they have all sorts of exceptions to duty, involved reasonings."

"Did you punish them?"

"I stopped the guard's pay. I had no proof against the others. I showed them they hadn't fooled me, dropped the matter."

"You did right."

"I had decided to push into the Guir Plateau. But before daylight, events caused me to alter my plans. Three women and an old man arrived on foot. They belonged to a small caravan raided the preceding morning, a few miles north. The raiders had killed three men who had made a show of resistance, taken the camels and baggage, left the three women and the old fellow after abusing them. One of the women declared she had seen on one of the camels a saddle such as used by our men.

"We could not spare mounts, so we left them at the well, with sufficient food to last a week. Caravans often stop there, so they were all right. We found the spot where the attack had taken place, the three bodies, mutilated, unburied. Aware that the enemy was only thirty-six hours off, I pressed on to the limit. They seemed to sense us close behind, and

we could not gain appreciably. Several days later, in the rocky hills of Kemken, we found blood-stained rags, and farther a grave: A man wounded in the attack on the small caravan, dead from his wound. We reached the dried bed of the Daoura, there I was forced to realise the raiders had scattered. Reasoning they would meet again soon, I followed one trail.

"Four days later, I believed an engagement imminent. I had pressed the raiders back into the lower slopes of the Iraouen, knew they were slowed up by captured pack-animals, that I could easily overhaul them. I desired to give my men a rest before the attack, which might prove arduous in the hilly region. I called a three hours' halt.

"At four in the morning of the following day, I went ahead cautiously. Before eight, Perez signalled something in sight, gave obvious signs of excitement, shouting, waving his hands; going forward, I saw eight corpses upon the ground, laid in a row. The three camels taken from our courier and his escort were tied nearby.

"I had heard no shots during the day. I became certain the dead men, the raiders I had pursued, had been brought to the spot corpses, aligned for me to find. I was not a little puzzled to discover that the carbines, the sack of dispatches and mail, the saddles of the beasts taken from our men were complete, untouched. The mounts of the eight Ait Khebbashes were not in sight, nor their firearms. The side arms, swords and daggers, the empty cartridge-bandoliers were on the bodies."

Brangin paused, wiped his face before resuming.

"Those eight dead men struck me in the pit of the stomach in a queer, sickening surge. Strange, when you think yourself about to cope with living men,

how the sight of them *dead* hits you. There they were, all of them, lined up neat as a row of onions. Evidently disposed of by Moslem hands, for they were on their flanks, faces toward Mecca.

"Three of them had been slain outright by bullets, the others wounded and dispatched with the steel. No mutilations, a neat slash across the throat. My men did not have the same mysterious reasons as the killers to respect their property, stripped them naked in a turn of the hand. They became a queer-looking parcel of Ait Khebbashes, with their long, stiff toes pointing upward.

"'We'd better look into this,' I said to Perez, 'someone must have done it, and cannot be far away.'

"'I'm game, Lieutenant,' he replied.

"We skirted the cliff, sandstone like the one here, but smoother, with a sort of metallic gloss that some rocks in the desert acquire. We came to a wide pass, leading into the mountain, like a gateway. 'Do we go in?' I asked Perez. 'I'm game, Lieutenant,' he repeated.

"We took a look at the top to see if we were watched. Nothing to be seen, not a trace of smoke. The ground was hard, strewn with peebles, and it was impossible to tell whether anyone had passed through recently. In reality, the pass is probably wider at the top than at the bottom, but looking upward it seems to be squeezed together. Kind of cool and spooky. When we spoke, the echo came back. Our voices boomed like cannon shots. When we were quiet, nothing could be heard save the breathing of the camels, an occasional snarl, and the ringing of a carbine plate against a tin cup. Then Perez drew my attention. We were in a narrow place but could still keep abreast. 'That's where

our friends were slaughtered, Lieutenant.' Looking down, I saw stains upon the fine sand between the pebbles and not far away glistened two or three empty cartridge-shells.

"'I wonder if they're watching us?' I said. 'We're in so far they've got us anyway,' Perez stated. 'We can't seem to be scared.'

"The first warning shot came soon after. It slapped on a rock ahead, whirling off, whining. I dare not turn back. If shot down, I wanted to get it in front. The traditional bravery of the French officer, you'll realise——"

Vasil smiled in response, gave the speaker another cigarette.

"Then I found myself on the ground, with a tearing pain in my leg. My men fired aimlessly, three were dropped by an answering volley. Perez gave the order to cease firing, dismounted and freed me. Someone then stuck a pole around a bend in the path, a stick with a white rag tied to it.

"'They're asking for terms,' Perez said drily. He had kept his sense of humour, though I hadn't. Believe me, it was our bunch which should have hoisted that flag of truce. Perez shouted in his execrable Arabic for the man to show himself. A negro appeared, a huge, strong fellow, wearing a green and gold uniform, an immense turban.

"'The chief orders you to leave,' he informed me in Arabic. 'No man will fire upon you if you withdraw.'

"'I'm a chief also,' I retorted. 'I speak only to a chief.'

"He warned us not to move, vanished in the rocks. Five minutes later, he came back with a half dozen men behind him. One of them a man about your height, Captain Lartal, dressed in white, save

for a bit of black cord around his turban. Wore a full beard, graying black, a big gold bracelet on his left arm.

" Without speaking, he cut off my boot, ripped the trousers-leg open. He felt around, and I bit my lips to keep from yelping. Then he looked at my head, which had struck the rock in my fall.

" ' Nothing but a bruise,' he said in Arabic. ' However, the leg is indeed broken.' He addressed Perez : ' Get me sticks or plank, soldier, and I'll take care of thy chief. Order the others farther back, try no treachery, for, as God hears me, there are three hundred rifles within call of my voice.'

" I gave him my word no offensive move would be tried. He must have known something about fixing up a fracture. I can't say that he hurt me as much as Vasil did. The rest of his men were hovering near, holding their rifles, grinning.

" ' Listen to me,' he said to Perez and me when he had finished. ' I delivered your foes into your hands, giving back even the camels belonging to you, hoping thus to prevent you from coming here after them. I have no wish to fight the French, ask but to be allowed to live at peace. It was not intended to harm thee, Lieutenant. That others died was the will of God. It was not my choice.'

" I attempted to talk him into sending a delegation to us. He refused. Realising that several of our waterskins had been punctured, he told us where we could find water below. I accepted a drink from him, he took a cigarette in exchange. Everything was terribly friendly, had it not been for the bodies down the path, being wrapped in their cloaks for transportation to the plain, I could have believed myself paying a friendly call."

" Where does the woman come in ? " Lartal asked.

"I didn't see her until she was quite near, peering at me over the shoulder of one of the negroes. She had climbed on a rock. I was speaking with the old man, her father, I presume, for there was a certain resemblance between the two.

"I happened to glance up. I saw her face and stopped talking. You've seen good-looking native women, Captain. You know that although the average beauty of the Arab and Berber woman is exaggerated by most accounts, a fellow occasionally sees a real beauty. She was the prettiest I have ever seen. Young, too, seemed around sixteen or seventeen.

"The biggest, softest brown eyes you can imagine, a kiss in each glance! Around her black hair, she had wrapped some sort of a silky scarf, greenish, with gold threads woven in. Her skin was a burnished gold hue, smooth—I can't describe it. I've never seen such skin. The blood was in her cheeks, I guess. She glowed like a ruby. Full lips, but no suggestion of the negroid about them, and red—red——"

"Paint—" Lartal suggested.

"No. She was near enough to see——"

"What a chaste description," Lartal commented. "Tell us more."

"The old man turned around, following my glance. He said something in a language I did not understand, My men told me later it was similar to Druya. She did not leave immediately, but came close to me, touched my leg with her fingers.

"'Much hurt?' she asked in Arabic.

"'A while ago, terribly,' I replied, 'now, no.'

"She was not stupid, understood what I meant. She laughed. Dressed all in white, with a sort of belt thing fastened under the breasts, I have never

seen anything so pretty. Not small at all, you understand, but—neat. She spoke with the old fellow, he answered, and I was hoping I would be held prisoner."

"Shape of nose, tattoo marks?" Lartal asked. "May help identify the tribe."

"A small nose. You know how many native women have broad nostrils. Hers are slim. A little nose, a spiritual nose. A gold necklace around her neck. Perez thought her beautiful, too. Small hands, small feet—you could see them because she wore sandals, tied around the big toe. The toe nail of that big toe was like a rose petal. No tattoo marks at all. I would have liked to speak to her, but she ran off, and it was as if someone had turned out a light. I was already thinking I'd never see her again when she came back, with a basket filled with oranges."

"Points to an oasis somewhere near," Lartal said, turning to Vasil.

"The small, juicy ones that stay green," Brangin explained. "If I had not been afraid of offending the old man and queering myself, I'd have kissed her hand. Not because she gave me the oranges, but her hands are worth a kiss for their own sake."

"Possibly," Lartal consented. "Yet, one must discount her beauty, considering you had not seen a decent looking woman for months. You saw her in a moment of tension. She gave you oranges when you were thirsty."

"She'd pass muster anywhere," Brangin said, who was willing to talk on. Vasil intervened.

"You need rest. We'll leave you—try not to fret."

"Sure," Brangin grumbled. "When through pumping me, you go."

"We'll be back in the morning. Remember, Lartal has had a long trip. He must get to sleep."

Vasil picked up the lamp, led the way outside after taking leave of Brangin. At the end of a long hall, he halted before a door, which he pushed open, holding the lamp high, revealing a cell-like room similar to Brangin's, with the identical simplicity in furnishings.

"Your boxes are here. I'll send the servant."

Lartal struck a match, lighted the tallow candle stuck in the neck of a bottle, propped up the wooden blind of the small window.

"Whose room was this?"

"No one occupied it permanently. Transients, officers on topographical missions. Everything you need on the wash-stand. Good-night."

"Good-night, Vasil."

Left alone, Lartal inspected the room casually, thrust his head into a niche, where a tub of galvanised tin had been placed. He stripped, stood in the tub. As if his splashings had sounded an irresistible call, the servant entered, emptied pitchers of cold water over Lartal's back, without inquiring whether he liked it or not. While the captain rubbed his shoulders, the boy unlocked one of the trunks.

"Whites to-morrow, Captain?"

"Yes."

The servant selected a white suit, transferred to the coat the gold braid insignia of rank, the three decorations, then suspended it from a home-made coat hanger.

Lartal, once more alone, stood in the centre of the room, stretched absent-mindedly. He seldom exercised deliberately, but this was the feline's instinct to keep himself limber. Beneath the smooth

white skin of his back, elastic pads lifted, cords rippled from shoulders to wrists as he flexed and relaxed his arms. Above the right elbow bulged the fencer's muscle. He thumped his taut stomach muscles with satisfaction.

Against one of the walls was a wooden coffer, placed there to hold clothes, books, personal objects. He lifted the lid, to transfer his linen from the trunks. At the bottom, he found a red covered copy-book. Two pages were covered with fine writing : ' I have been thinking of you all day. You are very far away as distance is considered, but very near to me in fact. Your face in the lamp-light, the little curls, like chips of fine gold on your neck——"

Lartal read on with a wry grin. Strange to think that a man had been seated here, with his thoughts full of a woman. It occurred to him with surprise that nowhere had he ever sat down to write to a woman, save banal notes, stilted, censored descriptions of his life. Half a dozen women had counted in his existence. Yet, now, he could not visualise any one of them. They had merged into one, a composite, with a general name : Woman.

He identified the last occupant of the room by a process of elimination, a slender, polished gentleman, soft of speech, more interested in geological topics than in military matters. He wore gold-rimmed glasses on a jutting nose. Lartal could have sworn he did not assay more than a gramme of romance to the ton. He had been mistaken. There was the surface for everyone to see, and there was that beneath to be shown to one being alone, the Woman.

Would the time ever come when, in the seclusion of a cell-like room, he would distil sentimental ravings on innocently white paper ?

He slipped beneath the sheet, drew the blanket up around his shoulders, blew out the candle. The moonlight, oozing through the slats of the blind, turned the white of his uniform into a glistening patch, on which the braid glittered greenly.

To Paul Lartal, lying nude in bed, it seemed as if his other self, his military ego, was watching him quizzically from within the coat.

CHAPTER II

WHILE Lartal was dressing the next morning, there came a rap on the door.

"Come in——"

Perez appeared. Under the high white helmet, bearing above the rim the crescent and star of the French North African Cavalry, his dark face showed up square, resolute. He brought his heels together smartly, saluted, with the precision of the professional soldier.

"I beg pardon for disturbing you, Captain. I thought you'd like to see the men. They want to meet you, and I told them you'd inspect them before breakfast."

"I'll be down soon."

The *Meharistes* of Tabelkala were drawn up in the courtyard, tall, rangy fellows in white; brown faces, brooding black eyes, beak-like noses, torsos outlined by the pressure of the cross belts of red, blouses caught in the broad leather belt bearing the cartridge-pouches. Some wore leather leggings, but the majority affected sandals, on which the bare feet lay, secured by two leather straps, one around the ankle, the other passing over the big toe. They carried the short bayonet on the right side, passed through the belt like a dagger instead of dangling from the left as infantrymen.

"Present arms!" Perez called.

The carbines lifted. Lartal saluted. The noncoms stepped forward to be presented to the new chief.

"Abd es Selim, Sergeant," Perez introduced.

"Corporal Kalfat ben Mansour. Corporal Messaoud ben Ali——"

Lartal grasped the outstretched hands, spoke a few words to each man.

"Corporal Amar ben Kaddour el Tlemsani——"

An old soldier, with grey hair in his beard, bearing the ribbons of two medals.

"Greetings," Lartal said. "I'm glad to see thee again!"

"Praise Allah we meet again, Captain! Thy wisdom has increased, from what men speak of thee."

Tlemsani had served under Lartal on the captain's first trip into the south. For two years they had been constant companions.

"We shall speak later, Tlemsani." Lartal turned to Perez: "Everyone's here?"

"No, Captain. Several men are guarding camels at the oasis."

"I'll see them shortly. Tlemsani will come with me. Dismissed."

Lartal found Vasil already seated in the dining-room.

"You don't let the grass grow beneath your feet, Lartal. Well, what do you think of them?"

"Fine men. Recognised two privates, and old Tlemsani is a corporal here."

"I understand he is a lazy chap," Vasil declared. "Gets out of all the jobs he doesn't like."

"After you've travelled the long caravan routes for years as a guide, patrol seems tedious."

"I dare say." Vasil greased a gritty roll with canned butter. "You'll be settled in a couple of days, and can go out and get acquainted with the region."

"I'm going to the oasis this morning."

"I wish you much joy."

"Can you manage to sell me a couple of sheep? I'd like to treat my men to a bit of a dinner."

"I'll get the supply sergeant to attend to that," Vasil assured. "Also, double ration of tea and tobacco. Will that do?"

"Fine. I'll settle next quarter. Blew my pay on uniforms and extras before coming down."

"You can economise out here. Even after deducting my private expenses for wine, presents to cook and servants, I'll feel like a small capitalist when I go on leave."

Lartal found Tlemsani waiting at the stables. He had already obtained horses, knowing well that Lartal would not use a camel for the short trip. The two miles separating the Post from the oasis were covered in a few minutes.

In the days when the Berbers had occupied the old fortress, an effort had been made to organise the oasis. Winding in and out at the foot of the palms were shallow irrigation ditches, some still in use. There was a vegetable garden, tended by an old infantryman, who supplied the Fort with fresh greens.

The herd was grazing on the northern fringe. Lartal could recall the days when he had hated camels with virulent hatred. Sulky, stupid as a sheep, vicious as a mule, with the roar of a mad lion, the camel is not an animal from which to expect perfection in military evolutions. A foolish brute, which will consume eighty to one hundred pounds of fodder, day after day, hay, leaves, dry twigs, even large sticks, which will endure tremendous fatigue, emerging a little leaner, wrinkled of hump, but with the eternal, dignified lift of the split lips, only to keel over and die some fine morning without visible reason.

Lartal noticed two of the animals painted with tar, a remedy against itch. In a big cauldron, wheat was being boiled in oil, a concoction efficacious in cases of colic. He examined the hoofs of several beasts, cut by the hard, pebbly stretches encountered by Brangin on the last patrol. He stepped to the nearest ditch, cleaned his hands. Then he called Tlemsani.

"Wert thou with the Lieutenant on the last trip?" he asked.

"I was not, Captain." Tlemsani stroked his beard softly: "I was ill, very ill."

Lartal sat down in the shade, motioned to Tlemsani to join him.

"Why wert thou ill, tell me?"

"Allah sends men sickness as well as health."

"Formerly, Tlemsani spoke the truth."

"To-day is as yesterday between us, Captain. I'll speak the truth."

Tlemsani filled his pipe leisurely, borrowed a match, smoked. As his name indicated, he was ...ity born, in Tlemsin, Algeria. But he had left ...alls early, had led the roving life of the desert *...pace-drinker*. When he joined the *Meharistes*, he ...as middle aged, although strong and alert. Where ... had spent the first forty-five years of his existence, ... one could quite gather, for he had done all things, ...om slave raiding in the Congo to guiding caravans ...tween Marrakesh and the Sudan. He was a man ... vast knowledge and glib tongue.

"I listen," Lartal prompted.

"In these many years, Captain, I have seen all ...ere is to be seen in the desert, have I not? I have. ...lah is my witness. Therefore, I am not as a young ...n, eager to go here and there, hoping elsewhere ...n at the place where he happens to be he will

find more food, more money, and more beautiful women. I knew well the raiders would not linger, but would make for their tents. And even should we find them—the camels and carbines they had stolen belonged to the Government. No profit for a hard trip."

Tlemsani looked at Lartal for approval. The officer laughed.

"When I go after raiders, I had best leave thee behind, unless there is wealth to be taken?"

"No, Captain. Where thou dost go, I go also. Thou and I, we were young together."

"Am I an old man, then?"

"Not old, yet older than before."

Lartal lighted a cigarette from the glowing pipe held out by Tlemsani, lolled back, arms circling his knees, braced against the trunk of a palm.

"Who was the man the sentries let go in the night, during the Lieutenant's trip?"

"What man, Captain?"

"Have not the men who were there spoken to thee concerning him? Of how he left with his belongings, and the sentries did not shoot him?"

"I heard merely that a man had been taken and had run off."

"Thou canst tell me nothing more?"

"There are things of which I may speak, others of which I may not. Some things there are of which I know little," Tlemsani waved his pipe in a slow, deprecating gesture: "Each man knows but little. Allah knows all."

"Thou hast heard, however, how the raiders were found dead on the ground?"

"I have."

"And of the people who slew them, dost thou know?"

"The people who live in the Iron Mountain? Yes, Captain."

"What breed of people are they?"

"In my travels, I have been among all sixty tribes of Tafilalet and Draa. Here and there, as men talked together around the fires, they mentioned the people of the Iron Mountain. The Arabs said they were like Kabylians, the Moors said they spoke Druya. They are brave men, those of the Mountain. They shoot true. I was once told a big band of soldiers came, sent by the Sultan of Morocco, of which many were killed in the Pass. Then the Moroccans, among whom were the red-clad infantrymen trained by the English Kaid in the city of Fez, tried to climb into the Mountain from the north. There they lost many more. So what was left of them went away, never to come back. The tribes who sometimes pitch their tents near the Pass say they are devils, sons of devils, that their feet are shaped as those of horses, that they are wedded to beautiful women that Satan sends them to beget them sons. But those are not tales to be wholly believed," Tlemsani added, hastily.

"What else is said of them?"

"During the big column, when the French sent four thousand camels and one thousand men, including the Legionaires from Bel Abbes into the south from Colomb-Bechar, I listened to an old marabout who walked with the camel-herders. He said that when he was young, there was no one in the mountain that was shaped like a man, only devils whom one could not see with the eyes. Men did not enter the Pass, fearful they would be bewitched, and made to carry away demons in their bosoms. Ever since the oldest man could remember hearing his grandfather speak, it had been thus—no beings in

any way visible or human. Then one night men camped near the cliff heard sounds as if thousands and thousands and yet more thousands of men, women, camels and horses were passing not far off. They were brave men, those who heard, but knew that so many people had never come across the desert, either from west or east. So they waited, and listened to the many voices, to the squealing of camels, the neighing of horses, the bleating of sheep. But they dared not go and look, for fear they were already bewitched and that what they heard was not in the desert but within their own spoiled heads."

.

In Brangin's room that evening Lartal related the story told him by Tlemsani. The lieutenant listened seriously. Vasil grinned and nodded :

" If we could locate the *marabout*, you could pin his testimony to your report, Brangin."

Lartal perceived that Brangin, in spite of his apparent good humour, was resentful. Chaffing him on his yarn had passed the point of comedy. He threw back the lieutenant's blanket, looked at his leg, for he had misgivings as to the condition of the fracture.

" I think the old man did a better job than Vasil," Brangin stated. " What was the idea of taking the splints off, anyway ? "

" My hunch we'd better send you to the hospital."

" They can break the leg again if necessary and reset it——" Vasil added.

" When is the next convoy due ? " Lartal asked.

" In two days. We'll send you back with the escort, Brangin."

Lartal had a double saddle prepared, a *pannier* such as is sometimes used on ambulance mules in Europe : a bag of sand on one side, tested to equal

Brangin's one hundred and fifty pounds, the lieutenant to recline on a comfortable seat, his broken limb stretched out, motionless, on a plank. Over the whole was spread a canopy of striped canvas. At the departure, Perez adjusted a strap here, a buckle there. Vasil was casual, brisk, jocular in manner.

"Take care of yourself," Lartal advised. "I won't ask for another lieutenant. I'll handle the bunch alone until you come back."

He signalled to the Arab in charge of the mount. The animal shivered from stem to stern, coughed, grumbled, rose jerkily. The north gate was opened wide, the camels filed out in a concert of curses, shouts, the thumping of clattering blows on solid ribs.

Vasil cupped his hands around his mouth :

"Eh, Brangin !"

Brangin's face appeared like a pink blotch between the back of his seat and the white helmet.

"What ?"

"If she writes you, shall I forward the letter ?"

The lieutenant waved a clenched fist menacingly, called out.

"Why did he say ?" Vasil turned to Lartal.

"You heard right."

"He's a foul-mouthed individual at times," Vasil murmured. "But, Good Lord, how I'll miss him."

They did not hear from Brangin until two months later. Vasil read the letter aloud. The young officer said his recovery was simply a matter of a few weeks. The captain turned to the official paper :

"A bet that the first one is absurd." He exclaimed a moment later : "I win ! I must indicate immediately what measures I have taken to raise poultry

and larger live stock near Tabelkala. Oh! The usual complaint: Reports on the attitude of the local tribes are not complete. Here's something for you——"

Lartal unfolded the slip. It was from the Major commanding the region.

"Order is given to Captain Lartal to set out within shortest possible delay to meet raiding band Ouled Djerir signalled by Colomb-Bechar as having attacked native group near Bu Alal. Raiders reported twenty-five rifles, proceeding good pace south-westerly direction, presumably cross Erg Raouy Dunes level with Azrar Well."

"More details in here," Vasil offered: "Looted caravan of pilgrims going north to embark at the seacoast for Arabia, Mecca and way stations."

"Heavenly favour slipped a bit. Pilgrims robbed of their worldly goods by men less worthy of Paradise." Lartal read the order once more, sent Halef to call Sergeant Perez. "Here's the map. Azrar—let's see—fifty-odd kilometres."

"Less than a day if you push your men."

"No use going there," Lartal explained. "They had reached and passed Azrar, if they did make for it, before the courier was two-thirds of the way down here. I believe it would be best to strike at a tangent, a couple hundred kilometres east."

"A month's pay you see neither hide nor hair of them."

"Taken," Lartal accepted.

"You'll have earned your money, if you win."

Perez entered.

"Sergeant, have everything ready to start at six to-morrow morning."

"Yes, Captain."

"Weed out the irresolutes. You should know them by this time. We're not going for a promenade."

"Yes, Captain."

"See that Corporal Tlemsani is not left behind."

"Understood, Captain."

Perez left.

"What is your first goal, Lartal?"

"The Ambsi Dunes," Lartal replied, consulting the map. "The Ouled Djerir will want to fill up their camels before starting across the Draa Plateau."

"If you don't find them there?"

"I'll proceed right on, have a look on the trail to the Mahmid Oasis, for which our friends are undoubtedly bound."

"Does that direction remind you of anything, Lartal?" Vasil smiled gently. "One might by accident become confused and end up before the Iraouen Mountains. Luck having guided it would be too bad if one did not have a look at the celebrated Pass."

Lartal grinned guiltily.

"I don't know but it would be a temptation."

"Let me remind you that the Draa Plateau is not the safest place in the world."

"I promise the greatest caution. I am not eager to have my head a trophy in some Draa village, with my insignia dangling between my teeth. Recall, however, that Brangin crossed the Draa twice, the last time unfit for service, with the whole show resting on Perez. As for sticking my head into that hornet's nest of the Iraouen, you know me little if you believe I will."

"Whatever you do," Vasil added with a sceptical smile, "remember I order you to keep within reasonable limits in your expedition."

" What are the limits ? "

" You decide. If you succeed, you've kept within reason. If you fail, you've been rash. That's what it adds up to in the end."

" If I have definite clues and the chase carries me west, I'll say it was a sign from above and nose around a bit." Lartal spread his tanned hands across the unfolded maps on the table. " Some time ago, I set out from Timbuktu into the southern desert. I was a lieutenant then, under a captain who, it developed later, had lost his grip. He kept within his strict orders, hesitated, and we were cut up badly. I decided then I would not hesitate."

" You have the explorer's soul," Vasil commented drily.

The next morning, soon after the First Prayer, Perez informed Lartal that the *Meharistes* were outside the walls, ready to start.

They were drawn up in a single line, carbine butts resting on the right thighs : immense phantoms of white on tawny camels. Each man had already drawn across the lower part of his face the veil shutting out sand and dust from mouth and nostrils. Lartal had replaced his tunic with a *gandoura* of pure white wool, a long garment with wide sleeves, cooler than lighter fabrics, warm enough to protect him from the chilly night winds. The straps of revolver, canteen and map-case crossed his chest. Hung from the cross-piece of the saddle was a Lebel carbine, the mechanism wrapped in a greasy cloth.

Vasil and the white noncoms came out to bid him and Perez *au revoir*.

" Ready, Captain ! " Perez called.

Lartal bent from the high saddle, felt his fingers gripped by the shorter fingers of Vasil, lifted his hand to signal to the sergeant.

"Let's go."

The *Meharistes* lifted their carbines high in unison, a last salute to the Post, and followed the two Europeans down the slope, to skirt the western end of the oasis and reach the flat land. Again Lartal's arm went up vertically, behind him he felt like a physically perceptible touch the glances of his men, waiting to learn, officially, the direction they were to follow.

They all knew that should Lartal head due north the pursuit of the raiders would not be dogged, that the expedition would be limited to a perfunctory demonstration of activity. Lartal held his hand poised, then with a sharp, imperative gesture, levelled his arm almost due west, indicating the horizon across the shimmering plateau.

CHAPTER III

BEFORE coming to Africa, Lartal had imagined the Sahara a great spread of sand dunes, dotted with picturesque palm oases. Of its immensity, its diversity, he had no clear conception. After ten years, he knew it to be a world in itself. Below sea level in the Jouf, jutting eleven thousand feet at the summit of Mount Ilaman, the desert has its many lands of fear, lands of thirst ; here, arid ground, lunar in its sinister barrenness, elsewhere exuberant vegetation. It is seamed with the dry beds of a thousand water courses, fed at intervals of years by torrents from the clouds.

Giant rocks rise, carved by centuries of exposure to the terrific storms and blasting lightning, fantastic shapes, tapering like minarets or massive as a Gothic cathedral. The swift changes of temperature crack the flanks of the rocks, open them in broad slashes of raw colour. Again the soil is covered with a hard crust of minerals that glistens in the sunlight like shellac. Elsewhere, the glance meets an expanse of sparkling white, a Russian steppe under the blazing sun ; a salt-pan, where the crystals left by evaporation have heaped into a fine, eternal snow. Here and there on the surface of this dead continent are the *hammadas*, the stone plateaux where the winds have licked the ground clean of sand.

For two days, mile after mile, hour after hour, the hoofs of the camels beat the petrified earth of the Daoura Plateau like the rolling of drums. At the second halt, fires were lighted, the camels formed into a square in the centre of which the *Meharistes*

camped. Double sentries were placed on each side of the square.

The frugal meal washed down with coffee, Perez lingered near his chief.

"We'll be sighting the Drissa Hills by noon to-morrow," he said, after reflecting a few minutes in silence. "We will then be at the Ambsi Dunes the following day."

"Slow progress, eh, Perez? After we get the kinks worked out, we may make better time. We'll know whether my guess was right soon."

Perez stirred the small fires of roots with a stick.

"Come on," Lartal invited, "what worries you?"

"I'm not exactly worried, Captain."

"You exhibit all the symptoms. Speak out, Perez."

"I just got to wondering, Captain, whether we were going back to that dump where the Lieutenant and I got into trouble."

"To be frank, I don't know myself. Very unlikely. My orders are to find the raiders. Get me in touch with them to-morrow, and I give you my word to take you back to Tabelkala as soon as we've settled with them."

The sergeant did not try to conceal his relief.

"I've heard the men say '*Rhneg ed Dahal,*' the Pass of Shadow, over and over. They're excited about it and don't appear to worry much over the raiders."

"If you listen to all that's said, Perez, you'll be in a constant fret."

"I don't, as a rule, Captain. This time, though, they seemed so sure."

"Not eager to have a second look, are you?"

"No, because I can truthfully say I spent a very dirty fifteen minutes, with the Lieutenant knocked

cold, the lead plop-plopping all about. If you've ever been ambushed in a narrow place, you can halfway imagine what it felt like, I'd sooner risk fifty encounters in the open than another ride into that cut-throats' hangout."

"You think after hearing all that I'd risk it?"

"Sure. A man always thinks: 'That other guy didn't know his business. I bet I could have done better.' Then he goes and tries, finds out there's nothing much to know, though there's a lot to learn."

Lartal lifted his right hand solemnly.

"May my beard stop growing and dogs defile my grave, if I step into the Pass. Satisfied, Perez?"

The sergeant laughed.

"I don't ask that much. Put it this way: 'If I take a bunch of poor devils in there with me.'"

He wandered off, joined the group of native noncoms smoking around a fire. Lartal saw him talking with animation. The sergeant was probably repeating his words. Lulled by the plaint of a flute, the captain fell asleep.

The next day, the advance guard of the detachment hailed a group of sheep herders, members of the Ait bu Reg tribe, a people unfriendly to the French. They tried to flee, but Perez and eight *Meharistes* out-distanced them easily, enclosed them between their carbines and the approaching main body.

Lartal soon convinced them they were not in danger. When tobacco was offered, they talked. The raiders were no friends of theirs. More than once, returning from ventures in the east, they had stolen sheep, camels from their villages. Invariably, they chose their time well, when the valid warriors were away on raiding expeditions of their own. True, the Ait bu Reg had not submitted to French rule, occasionally exchanged shots with patrols, but

between French and Ouled Djerir, they would pick the French.

The band sought by Lartal? They knew of it: fifteen or twenty men, good rifles, plenty of cartridges. Who led it? A very evil fellow, a certain Bu Jemma. The oldest man sat beside Lartal, drew on the ground, with the sharp end of a stick, the general relief of the vicinity.

"Here the dunes, here flat land, here again the dunes. They passed here, have been seen there, and are now—here."

"Ambsi," Perez put in. "Where you said."

Lartal glanced at the sun, took leave of the herders.

"Due north," Lartal instructed. "We better hurry, before those fellows change their minds and send a rider to warn Bu Jemma."

Nightfall found the detachment close to the dry bed of a stream. No fires were lighted. The exact location of the raiders had been ascertained by a trio of scouts sent ahead, who had seen smoke rising over the tops of the dunes.

"We'll attack on foot," Lartal outlined his plan. "Perez, you'll take ten men and circle on the north. I'll rush them with the rest, save a few who'll guard the camels. Even if you're not in sight when the firing starts, order a volley. That will disconcert them, in the excitement they won't know where it came from."

"Understood, Captain."

Bu Jemma was not unknown to the French. Neither a religious nor military leader of great ability, he could not inspire his men with much devotion. But he was a clever bandit, knew the tricks of the desert, had been known to slip between two groups of *Meharistes* and go off unscathed. Bu Jemma was never long in finding out the weaknesses

of patrol leaders, and used his discoveries to good advantage.

Perez started with his party at dawn. Lartal, wishing to give him time to circle the enemy, waited an hour before leading his men forward. The Ambsi Dunes are low, easy to climb. The passages between them form a footing as secure as a cement walk. Before eleven in the forenoon, Lartal had his men in position to strike, eight hundred yards from the camp.

There were but two fires, around which Lartal discerned a group of men. The others, for all reports mentioned a score, were probably posted as sentries on the dune crests, facing east.

He turned to Sergeant Selim.

" A little more than seven hundred metres. Don't try to hit a particular man at this range. Aim near the fires."

Abd es Selim translated the instructions into Arabic, to be passed along the line. Back-sights were adjusted.

" Ready, Captain."

" Fire after me."

Disregarding his own suggestion, Lartal drew bead on an isolated man, who was strolling between the fires and the camels. He fired, and missed. The bullets of his men struck the sand short of the mark. Rising dust marked the points of impact. In a flash, the Ouled Djerir reached their camels. Far off the volley discharged by Perez's men echoed.

He rose, and ran forward, dropped again, his action imitated by his men. The flashes of the raiders' return fire winked between the camels. There was a marksman among them, evidently, for one of the *Meharistes* ended his rush in a long slide, and lay face in the sand.

Another rush forward, thirty or forty yards, with the same slump at the finish. This time Lartal felt his mouth fill with sand. A bullet had struck six inches from his chin. It would be best not to expose himself or his men further until Perez had completed his movement.

He rolled on his back, spat, rubbed his eyes. At his side, Abd es Selim chuckled softly.

"Captain, that one—he gets good shot rating, eh?"

"Keep down or you'll find out. Shorten sights to six hundred."

The sand was growing hot, and the sun spilled from the gun barrel into his eyes.

"Some go now——" Abd es Selim volunteered.

Several camels were standing, two of them bearing each a rider. They raced away, pursued by a scattering of hasty shots.

"Lie still!" Lartal called out. "They're doing that to get us to rise."

It was his opinion that two of the riders were deliberately offering themselves as targets to create the impression of flight, and lead the *Meharistes* into pursuit. The ground between his present line and the camels would cost six or seven lives, entirely too high a price. The wisdom of leaving his own mounts so far behind did not appear so certain now.

"What's Perez doing!" he muttered.

The heat of the sun-baked sand pierced through his garments, searing his knees and elbows, radiated like a hot breath into his face. The temperature of the dune would increase with each passing minute. There was record of fighting in the dunes, when men had preferred to stand up and risk a bullet rather than roast alive.

14935

And it was he who had volunteered advice for others! He had lost sight of several important angles, had bungled the job. Of course, there was Bu Jemma ahead, whose capture or death would atone for any mistake. If Perez would only come——

On his left, a man stood up.

"Down!" ordered Lartal.

He was obeyed for a few minutes only. One after another, the *Meharistes* rose, unable to endure the hot sand. To Lartal's bewilderment, they were not fired upon. He himself stood up and took the lead, carbine ready. Above the hump of a prone camel peeped the crest of a turban. Lartal fired twice. No answering shot.

While he was still advancing, Perez and his group appeared between two dunes, two hundred yards short of the camels, but at such an angle that he could see behind the barricade of flesh. He lifted his hand, waved it:

"Gone!"

Lartal hurried forward, circled the end of the improvised entrenchment. No living man. A single corpse was propped against one of the dead animals. The throats of the camels had been recently cut, and their blood reeked on the sand. One dead man the reward for the morning's work. A life for a life. Two men were bringing in the body of the *Meharist* who had fallen after the first discharge.

"I spotted sentries on the dunes," Perez explained. "In avoiding them, I got lost in those twisting lanes circling the camp. I heard your shots, all right, but I couldn't tell where they came from, they resounded all over the place. I made a rotten job of it, Captain."

"No worse than I. You were fooled by bad luck. I have nothing to blame but my own stupidity."

"How did they succeed in getting away right under your nose?" Perez asked wonderingly.

"How? There were a dozen here when I started firing. We surprised them sure enough. Then I saw two of them leaving with some of the camels, thought that the rest were hanging on to give the baggage and prize animals a good start. How?" Lartal laughed in self derison: "A new device, Perez! They clung on the other side of the camels and under their bellies. We were anxious not to keep our heads up too long, and did not take more than a glance. For more than twenty minutes we toasted in the sun, while Jemma and his comrades ambled off."

"They can't have much of a lead——"

"Two hours at least by the time Telmsani brings up our camels."

In the first moment of disappointment, the failure loomed large. He would have preferred disaster to this sickening sense of having been tricked. Even now, his men were discussing among themselves, just what could have been done, and how——

Lartal knew that the tale would spread. And he had a superstitious dread of the first admitted defeat. Unless swiftly redeemed it would presage a series of defeats.

His *Meharistes*, yesterday raiders themselves, wolves turned watch-dogs, were as eager as he. They were united, in public opinion, with their chief, his shame was their shame, some of the ridicule spattered from him upon them.

In the days that followed, they rode in a sort of fever, peering forward, fingering their carbines, tireless, hour after hour, day after day, until one week was added to the first. The scent was warm, the trail easy to pick up. As was their custom the raiders

had tried to throw off their pursuers by scattering in all directions. Lartal kept behind the largest group, burdened by the stolen camels laden with loot, and therefore likeliest to be piloted by Bu Jemma.

North toward Tafilalet, south again, across the principal pasture lands of the Ait bu Reg. Bu Jemma had nursed his lead for two hours into twelve, sixteen, twenty-four. But Lartal refused to turn back. He had counted on one advantage. The Ouled Djerir had been away from their base several weeks at the time of the attack on the pilgrim's caravan. Since then, their beasts had not rested more than one night at a time, save for forty-eight hours in the Ambsi Dunes, which rest Lartal had foretold and interrupted. On the other hand, Perez had taken from Tabelkala animals which had been loafing months, fat, healthy.

At last, carcases marked the trail. When Lartal saw whirling flocks of vultures that heralded one of these grisly finds from afar, he knew that one chance of success had been taken from Bu Jemma. Then bundles of cloth, copper utensils, blankets, baskets hermetically sealed, filled with dried dates, small objects of lesser value were seen strewn along the path of the fleeing men. The vessel in distress was casting its cargo into the sea. And Bu Jemma had been forced to risk a straight line toward the home of his tribe, across the Draa Plateau.

Lartal lifted his whistle to his lips, and blew the sharp, staccato notes of the gallop. A dangerous gait at best, and more dangerous on hard soil.

By noon, the Ouled Djerir were in sight, six in number, the rest having succeeded in splitting from the main body and evading pursuit. It was more a massacre than a combat. No quarter was asked, or offered. The fighting sprawled over five miles before

the last man was downed, tumbling from the saddle and striking the soil with a thud. As there was no man left alive to question, Lartal was uncertain which of the fallen riders was Bu Jemma. Tlemsani, who knew or claimed to know, indicated one of the corpses, already stripped.

A lean body, slashed with a dozen long scars, a long skull, a coarse pock-marked face framed by a black beard. Despite the difference in stature, there existed a certain resemblance between Bu Jemma and Perez, the discovery of which proved a source of nervous laughter for the two Europeans.

The sole wounded of the French was standing proudly, keeping a stolid face while gauze was wrapped around the iodine-smeared hole in the shoulder. The cartridge-bandoliers, the rifles, a few amulets of the dead men were packed. Tlemsani assured Latral that there was a water-hole not more than ten hours' march. The detachment turned due west.

The ten hours grew into thirty, before the water-hole was at last located. The captain had kept little record of the distance covered, of the passing days, and so he called Tlemsani to obtain his bearing from known spots marked on the maps.

He jotted down notes, to be consulted in drawing up his report. At sunrise of the following day he would start toward Tabelkala——

" Arrived at Gazelle's Horns—" he wrote. " Two jutting rock formations, at an estimated distance of two hundred and twenty kilometres east of Tabelkala, midway between the Kemkem and the Iraouen Mountains——"

CHAPTER IV

PEREZ, after scanning the rocky barrier in the distance, glanced toward Lartal with an indefinable smile.

"Worth the trip, Captain?"

Lartal rested both hands on the horizontal arms of the saddle cross, and nodded silently. As a dried stone fence separating pasture lands is to the flank of a Vauban bastion, thus was the Tabelkala Cliffs to be compared with the first defence of the Iron Mountain.

The cliff had been visible from the level of the Draa Plateau, but crushed, dwarfed by the crests of the Lower Atlas looming behind it, mauve and violet against the blue. The ascent had been made in a number of rises, up a titanic stairway, each step of which was from fifty to a hundred feet in height. The approach had been gradual until the eye first met, across an unbroken stretch of glistening soil, two thousand feet of red-black sandstone, hard rock in a looser soil that had been blown away by the winds of eternity.

The enormous sun edged the stony lip with gold and orange.

"And the famous Pass, Perez?"

"A few miles to the south."

"And the well——"

"If I remember rightly, Captain, it should be straight ahead at the foot of that pile."

"We'll visit it. There'll be sufficient time then to see the Pass before night."

As he followed Perez he understood what Brangin had meant by rough country. He felt a new admiration for the younger man, realising what it had meant to risk ambush on the narrow lanes that crept up the flanks of the immense steps. His foes could have made a stand with odds in their favour at any one of a dozen places.

"Well" was a pompous name indeed to apply to the scanty supply of moisture that oozed from the bottom of the cliff and stained dark a patch of yellow sand.

"*Ain el Kahal*," suggested Abd es Selim. "The Source by the Cliff."

Perez, tunic open at the throat, with the bland expression of a guide piloting a tourist, strode from place to place.

"That's where we put the Lieutenant. And here, we laid one of the wounded. His belly was pierced and he wasn't supposed to drink water. I'm sorry I didn't give it to him, now. He died within an hour." He halted short and grinned. "Here's my name. I put it there with a hunk of chalky stuff I found—" With pride the sergeant pointed out his handiwork: "Long live the Legion—Perez." Then he added, indicating a few words scrawled in Arabic underneath: "Someone was around after me."

"Abd es Selim, too, has signed his name." With fine gradation of insult the native sergeant had left his opinion of the people from the Pass.

Given a dark surface and a piece of chalk, human beings react alike. Others among the *Meharistes* had been inspired to add, elsewhere, their comments.

And now the men, having succeeded in refilling several skins from the thin flow of water, and having a few minutes before them, prayed—using sand for the prescribed ablutions. When the Second Prayer

was concluded, Lartal ordered the detachment in the saddle.

They passed along the side of the cliff, toward the south. From time to time Lartal glanced upward, seeking sign of life.

"They're there, all right," Perez declared. "They didn't show themselves, either, until we went too far. They may get sore at seeing us again, and start shooting."

"Did you ever try to lean over the top of a thing like that and shoot straight down, Perez? It would be easier to toss over some of those boulders."

"Eh!" Perez exclaimed. "Suppose they did?"

"We can count on one or two misses as a warning."

Behind them, the *Meharistes* were casting uneasy glances upward, and chattering in low, excited voices. Now and again, one would indicate the cliff, give a precise point, and advance an opinion. Tlemsani, with the air of a man who had seen better things, scratched his beard as he rode, conceding, however, that the cliff was very high.

The mouth of the pass appeared, at first glance, a great avenue cut through the rock. Contrary to Lartal's expectations, he found it neither gloomy nor forbidding.

"Not here—" Perez said, as if in answer to his thoughts. "But a few hundred yards farther, where the bend comes—it chokes right down."

For a moment Lartal struggled against temptation.

"Listen, Perez, I'd like to have a look. If we're you here with the men, it will be understood by them not watched it'll be all right. If we are, and I leave up there that I will not go far."

Perez lifted his shoulders:

"Risky——"

" Before they gave warning—and they're not such rotten shots they'll hit me by mistake."

He ostentatiously discarded his weapons, carbine and revolver, which he gave into Perez's keeping. With a last recommendation not to follow him under any circumstances, he entered the Pass.

Lifting his hand in a token of goodwill, he urged the camel forward, until he reached the first narrow defile. The sun stabbed the walls above in ruddy streaks. Below, there appeared a translucent haze, then semi-darkness. The air was clammy, almost cold.

" Greetings ! " Lartal shouted.

His voice rang, vibrated. No answer came. He repeated the hail three or four times. He could see no one although he sensed that he was watched. Again, the desire to go forward swept him, and he had to check himself. He was an officer, had charge of thirty-five men. A first experience had proved the Pass unsafe. The hidden guards might lose patience and aim accurately, without warning. He did not care to lose his life through a curiosity that never would be satisfied.

Reluctantly, he turned back.

" See anything, Captain ? " Perez asked, tensely.

" Nothing but a bat, which I scared up by yelling."

" We could hear you from here."

" Give me my revolver——"

He fired three shots into the air, then waited, his glance roving along the edge of the cliff. Three additional detonations broke the stillness. Then he broke the weapon, the empty shells dropping to the ground. He reloaded.

" Evidently, Messieurs the Demons are not at home to us," he concluded.

"Where are we going to camp, Captain?" Perez asked, seemingly eager to get away from the spot.

"At the Source."

Before leaving the vicinity of the Pass, when perhaps four hundred yards from the rock, Lartal brought his field glasses from the case and looked upward. He passed them to Perez.

"Follow my hand—is that smoke?"

"Must be. We don't see clouds of that sort here."

The captain took the glasses again, to search out the faint sooty smudge that rose from behind a screen of stone. His attention was attracted anew by a scintillation near the rim of the cliff. Sun on steel. Again he turned to the sergeant for confirmation.

"Some guy is on his belly up there," Perez lifted his carbine: "It's a long shot——"

"Easy on that," Lartal objected. "It might be like kicking a bee-hive."

Perez tilted his helmet back, wiped his forehead with grimy fingers.

"You're right, Captain—" he agreed. "We better get away before something happens. This dump's bewitched."

At the Source a squad was detailed to bring in fuel, brush which ignited easily, with a bright flame, emanating a strong aromatic odour. The encampment was closed on one face by the side of the cliff, protected further by the semicircle of camels.

The mission on which they had started out was fulfilled, the days of danger and anxiety were behind. On the following morning, Lartal would turn toward Tabelkala. In ten days, two weeks at most, they would be in their own quarters again, chatting with those left behind on camel-guard at the oasis.

The night was cool, the stars bright. Someone produced a flute, another man improvised a tambourine. A chanting voice arose :

" The slave has the plough—
The free man has the gun—"

The whine of the instrument, cadenced by the rumbling knuckles, was monotonous, not devoid of charm. Lartal delved recklessly into his provision of cigarettes, certain that but a few days separated him from a new supply. He sipped the strong coffee prepared by Perez, who had turned cook for the occasion. A few drops of alcohol added to the fragrant liquid contributed to soften his mood.

Perhaps Perez had come to the same conclusion in regard to alcohol that his superior had reached concerning tobacco. Several times he vanished into the comparative gloom outside the immediate illumination of the fires, returning on each occasion more cheerful, more communicative.

After a last journey to the pack animals, Perez sat quietly, keeping time to the music with bobbing head.

" Content, Sergeant ? " Lartal asked him.

" Quite, Captain. Oh, with you and Lieutenant Brangin, no man could kick. You're regular fellows." Perez nodded repeatedly, in solemn approval of his own speech : " Though—and this is no reproach, Captain, understand me, or I wouldn't talk about it—you take yourself seriously. I don't say that you are conceited, you understand me, Captain ; it's just that I don't think you have enough of a good time when you get the chance; The devil, Captain—a man must unbend——"

" True, Perez, a man must unbend."

" Many a time, the Lieutenant and I were

together, talking. Well, he had some good yarns to tell. There's a man who doesn't sleep much when on leave. He's got so many months, so many days of so many hours, and, without betraying any confidence, he makes the most of them." Perez laughed softly. "Life lasts just so long—at the end of the road a tumble—that's what he says."

"After me the deluge, eh, Perez——?"

"Right. He can wait for it out here."

"I'll bet you're not a tame man yourself."

"I?" Perez shrugged deprecatingly: "I am no longer what I was. There was a time—But you mustn't believe all you hear about me, Captain. Because I'm Spanish, some fellows told tales. They said I was a nobleman. I was born in Spain," Perez announced gravely. "I didn't do much until I was sixteen. Then I came to Algeria, to cut alfalfa. Then I joined the Foreign Legion. Not a day's punishment for three years! I learned French, was made a sergeant in the Legion. And I got to know pretty nearly what a man is like. If I were you, Captain—I—" Perez interrupted himself, half rose, and spoke with irritation: "What dost thou want, Tlemsani?"

Tlemsani, who had approached silently, sat down between Lartal and the sergeant.

"Do not rise, Captain," he said. "Someone is watching."

Lartal did not turn his head, gave no manifestation of surprise.

"I listen, Tlemsani."

"There are men near—I had already gone to sleep, near the camels to be away from the flute, and I heard. At one time they were very near. Yet I feared that should I cry out, one of them would shoot quickly and harm thee."

" You heard——? "

" First one, who knows not how to crawl. Then another, who is not much better. Many years have I been listening, and I hear what others would not hear."

Lartal recalled other nights, in the central desert, nights as dark as this. A lieutenant at the time, without the heavy responsibility of command, he had followed Tlemsani in his prowling outside the camp. There, lying still, face to the soil, every sense alert, they had waited for those who came in the sheltering darkness to butcher sentries. The pastime had its thrills, comparable to no other. There was a stark primitiveness about it, something of the old struggle when fireless tribes groped for their foes in the dark hours. He recalled the mingling of physical dread, and satiated hatred when arms met, hands clutched at random for the best grip, while armed fist was poised, waiting to strike with the knife.

" Dost thou remember, Tlemsani, when thou and I waited for the Tuareg in the darkness ? "

Tlemsani smiled reminiscently.

" Yes. Those were slain who came to slay. Thou wert young then." Tlemsani smiled his ineffably placid smile.

" A few shots would drive them away," Perez advised in French.

But Lartal resumed the conversation with Tlemsani in Arabic : " Thinkest thou they are from the Iron Mountain ? "

" Where else ? We could see the whole plateau in the daylight, and saw no one. Had strangers approached up the slopes, we would have heard the rocks roll in the stillness."

Lartal threw his cigarette violently into the fire.

"Thou dost believe I am afraid to go out, old man."

"No. A man may not fear death, yet love life."

Lartal was irritated in spite of the knowledge that Tlemsani had intended to produce just this reaction in the hope of another exciting period outside an armed camp. His desire to go out into the darkness was as strong as his desire to go into the Pass that afternoon, a desire which he had crushed down with the thought of responsibility. But those other times, with Tlemsani, he had returned safely.

"Thou dost speak well, Tlemsani. Greater than slaying a man, however, is taking him unhurt, able to speak. Is that not so?"

"It is so, Captain." Tlemsani admitted.

"Even thou, who knowest so much to judge from thy tales, knows not what these people are. Taken alive, they would speak. Whatever their tongue, thou couldst understand them."

"Unless they are indeed demons, yes, Captain."

"If demons, we shall not take them, so there's no worry over that. I have no knife——"

Tlemsani drew up his left sleeve, took from a sheath strapped on the left arm a long tapering blade, grooved in the centre, gripped by a leather covered handle, a perfect *flissa*. Although resolved not to kill, Lartal needed such a point to use as threat.

"A good weapon, Tlemsani. But what of thee?"

The Arab fumbled in the folds of his *gandoura*, produced another blade, of different workmanship, curved, but an equally efficient weapon.

"I have this also."

Lartal slipped the *gandoura* off over his head, removed his boots and stockings. Clad only in a blue flannel belt wound from hips to breast and the *serual* (loose native trousers) he exhibited sinewy

calves and muscular shoulders. Tlemsani showed his satisfaction.

" Perez, pass the word along that all are to behave as if nothing unusual is taking place. The flutes will go on playing, but there's no reason why the men should not draw discreetly nearer the carbines."

Perez stared at his chief.

" What are you going to do, Captain ? "

" Roam outside a bit and see what there is in the old fellow's talk."

" That's the kind of a trick that ends with a sticker in one's guts, Captain."

Lartal laughed: " Perhaps I've decided not to take things seriously, Perez——"

" I didn't mean it that way."

" I know you didn't." He turned to Tlemsani who had divested himself of his upper garments without rising. " Go back to the camels. I'll join thee."

" I've no right to give you orders—" Perez began.

" And that ends your responsibility. Now, I'll lie down, so if any one saw me strip they'll think I was going to sleep. You'll walk about as if on a round, tip off the sentries to be careful, the rest to be on the alert. In an hour or so, I'll have news for you, perhaps a guest for breakfast."

Perez moved his lips in protest, but only uttered the usual, dutiful answer.

" Yes, Captain."

After Perez had left Lartal lay quiet for at least fifteen minutes in case Tlemsani's approach and departure from the fire had been noticed. When he thought sufficient time had elapsed, he crawled slowly away towards the camels. He passed near the group of *Meharistes*, but not a head turned in his direction. The flute droned and the guttural words

clipped out as before. The camels were a few yards off and soon he was prone beside Tlemsani. Tlemsani did not hesitate, did not volunteer further advice, but crept between two of the camels. One of the beasts grumbled deeply, breathed hard, but dozed off.

The glow of the fires lighted the flank of the cliff, and the sides of the camels within the camp. Once outside, the two were lost as if dropped in a bottle of ink. Stars shone above, but in the shadow of the cliff, nothing could be distinguished six inches away.

Lartal felt a light touch on his arm. Tlemsani was indicating that he would take the left, leaving the right for the captain, close to the rock. The ground was cold, more than pleasantly cold. It was rough, and his skin, long unused to such contact, smarted. He had lost the knack of carrying a knife with ease. He feared momentarily that the steel, brought in touch with some solid substance, would ring faintly, a warning as loud as an alarm bell to a taut ear-drum.

His imagination, having lost the resilient self-trust of his subaltern days, worked feverishly. The darkness seemed filled with lethal steel. The skin on his elbows and knees was scraping off in strips.

He stopped crawling, strained for a sound indicating either Tlemsani or the suspected prowlers. The flute had taken on a new note. It seemed that the *Mehariste* blowing into it was performing on order rather than playing from inspiration.

He held his breath.

The ghost of a respiration, a faint panting, was drawing near, with a rustle as of hands against rough soil. The leather grip on the knife seemed to be swelling within his grasp. Nearer, now, to his left and behind. He did not move, finding in a single

surge, the patience and stoical immobility of the past. Inch by inch, the other was drawing even, passing him.

"Not a good skirmisher," he decided. "Can be heard too easily. Whatever they are, the people from above cannot teach those below anything about stalking."

He set out in pursuit, noiselessly, seeking to come near enough to the right hand of the other man to grasp it with his own. He reached back, slid his weapon within the flannel belt, confident now that he could disarm his opponent. He felt about tentatively, groped. The rustling drew away from him. Another patient chase. Again, groping.

Flesh——

His right hand closed about a wrist, his left arm shot out, struck a neck, slid by, and his palm was clamped over a warm mouth. With a sidelong roll, he turned the other on his back, threw himself heavily across the body. There was a struggle, Lartal felt teeth close into his palm. Slowly he brought his right knee up to replace his right hand. This position secured, heedless of the clawing left hand on his shoulder, he reached for his knife and pressed the point gently below the chin. Men die rather easily when rightly touched. The human carcass is a fragile mechanism——

"I will not kill thee, I swear. Do not shout and thy life is spared——"

To make certain that he was understood, he repeated the words in halting Druya. Cautiously, ready to close down again on the lips, he opened his left hand.

"Dost understand?"

No sound. No move.

"I hope I didn't break his neck with that first

lunge," he thought. " Either he didn't put up much of a fight, or I'm stronger than I used to be."

He reached out. His fingers touched forehead, nose, at the same time he became aware that the form lying unconscious at his side exuded a pleasant odour, faintly perfumed, wholesome. A warrior who has been in the sun wrapped in wool emanates a strong stench of sweat.—Hish and closed around a soft, beardless chin.

" A youth. Little wonder I handled him easily ! "

No gash on the yielding neck, no sticky warm liquid to tell him that he had pushed the blade too far. No wound. But still no movement, no whisper. He bent to listen for the heart beats. From the round shoulder his fingers moved over silk, lower——

His hand encountered the firm round breasts of a woman.

Rather tempting !

CHAPTER V

He was holding her tightly in his arms, and for the first time he looked down into her dazed, frightened eyes. He moved slowly to the central fire, and allowed her to slip to the ground, where she remained crouched, her hands across her breast.

Perez, carbine in hand, came nearer.

"That's the kid we saw in the Pass, Captain!"

Lartal grinned: "The one who was so kind to the Lieutenant?"

"As much like her as a drop of water is to another, Captain."

"What's she doing here?"

"Don't ask me. Maybe looking for the Lieutenant."

"I wish he'd been in my place a while ago, when the scratching was going on," Lartal muttered, staring curiously at this girl who had been so glowingly described by the romantic Brangin.

She was graceful in a savage way, but did not suggest the doll-like daintiness ascribed to her. The bare arms and neck, smooth and white, were delicately muscled. A white scarf, wound turban-like around her head, was disarranged, revealing a mass of dark hair that shone in the firelight with glints of copper. The pure oval of her face ended in a round, wilful chin. Her eyes were the classical long eyes of the oriental woman. The lips, rather full, seemed like live coral, and the blood rushing to her cheeks was visible through the transparent skin like a crimson vapour rising in liquid.

From the sharp contrast between the tan of her

face and the white of her shoulders, Lartal understood that she did not wear a veil, but was used to showing her face to all, like the women of Kabylia. The thin voluminous trousers ended at the bare ankles. The white shirt-like garment, covering her from shoulders to hips, did not conceal the curves of her body. She was evidently not accustomed to being unclad when among men.

Lartal picked up a blanket and threw it over her shoulders.

"Who are thy people?" he asked abruptly in Arabic. Then, when she stared at him defiantly: "What is thy name?"

She did not answer.

Abd es Selim, pressed into service as interpreter, repeated the same questions in various dialects.

"She understands, all right," Perez expressed as his opinion. "But she'll be damned if she'll tell us anything. That's the way she feels about it. Look at her, Captain! Pretty enough to be laden with jewels, but with such a mean temper that a true man would strangle her."

"She's sore because I caught her. That's natural. Abd es Selim, tell her no insult will be given her. Soldiers of France do not fight women."

The native sergeant spoke. She did not look up, or change expression. Lartal noticed that the cameo lines of her features were unexpectedly broken by the faintest tilting of her nose.

Perez fetched the first-aid kit, broke a small glass tube, painted the captain's palm with iodine, dabbed at the scratches scattered on shoulders and chest. Lartal slipped his arms into the sleeves of a white tunic, also brought by Perez, and sat down on a folding stool.

"Dost thou understand Arabic?"

He caught a fleeting light in her eyes that resembled a smile, and he went on :

" If thou dost speak, very likely I will allow thee to leave soon. If not, I may have to take thee back with me, far away, where there are men who will know how to question thee." She watched him solemnly as he struck a match and lit a cigarette. " It's no use, Perez, I don't know whether she's just scared, or stubborn as a donkey."

" Perhaps the other prisoner will talk," Perez suggested.

" What other ? "

" The black brought in by Tlemsani. He was back within five minutes."

" Call him."

Tlemsani approached, leading his prisoner, a statuesque negro, protruding lips, bullet skull, small head perched on Herculean shoulders. His hands were tied behind his back. From the corner of his mouth blood oozed, one eye was swollen, reduced to a slit. A long slash on the left shoulder revealed the dark, liverish flesh.

Lartal caught the girl by the wrist as she leaped up toward the newcomer. She was weeping now, and talked to the black in a peculiar Berber dialect. The negro grinned reassuringly. With the philosophy of his race he reasoned, that as he was not slain immediately, he ran little danger now of losing his life.

" Hast thou a tongue ? " Lartal asked harshly, in Arabic.

" My mouth is cut. My tongue is whole——"

" How many men were with you out there ? "

" I was alone with—" he indicated the girl with his eyes.

" Why did you come so few in number ? "

"I don't know, Master. She said we were to come. I obeyed."

"Who is she?"

"I cannot tell."

"She has told thee not to speak?"

"She has told me not to speak."

"There are ways of making a man speak. Dost thou know?"

"As Allah wills."

"Where didst thou find this black, Tlemsani?"

"Outside, Captain. I had no desire to hurt him, but did so because he fought. He is a large man. Then, to keep him from crying a warning, I put the hilt of my knife in his mouth. No harm has been done that a few days will not heal."

"I am not reproaching thee, Tlemsani. I merely want to find out if he speaks the truth about the number near the camp."

"He speaks the truth, Captain. Had there been others near, they would have gone to help the woman, after hearing all the noise thou wert making."

"Thy mistress speaks Arabic also?" Lartal asked of the black.

"Yes."

"Why does she refuse to speak?"

"Ask that of her."

"Tell me what I desire to know, Negro, and I will free thee to-night."

"If she be not free by morning, many men will come to attack you——"

"Fool's prattle," Lartal commented. "No effort will be made for fear that we will kill her. Where did you leave your mounts, for you did not come on foot."

It was evident that the girl dominated the situation. Before his answer the black consulted her with a glance.

"At the mouth of the Pass."

"Camels?"

"No, horses." The negro hesitated. "Where we left her garments and mine."

"There is no more that you are permitted to say?"

"There is no more."

"Tlemsani, thou wilt watch him."

"There is no need," the black said. "I would not leave her."

"Better put up my tent, Perez," Lartal suggested. Then he called the orderly and had brought forward an assortment of small tins, placed on the ground before the girl. Unexpectedly she smiled, and the captain was strangely stirred.

"Which one?" he asked.

She scanned the labels, laid the tins side by side, seemed puzzled, then selected a can of sardines. Lartal shook the contents on a tin plate, but she scorned the fork which he offered and ate with her fingers. He watched her as a man watches a child, smiling, speaking a few words now and then. She understood evidently, for she laughed at his jokes. He abandoned the stool and sat beside her nearer the fire. Looking up, he discovered a group of *Meharistes* near.

"Get back to your places, all of you. There's no need for everyone to be awake."

"You had given no further orders, Captain," Perez pointed out, from a distance.

"They do not need to stand there, gaping." He turned to the girl. "Hast thou eaten that before? I know thou dost understand Arabic. Would it really harm thee to utter a single word? Who should be the one to complain?" He held out his lacerated palm.

She touched it lightly with her own palm, laughed again, then, gathering his fingers in hers, pushed his hand away. Perez, from before the tent which he had quickly erected, looked on with narrowed eyes, an ironical smile on his lips.

Lartal got to his feet.

"See the tent? Thou'lt be permitted to sleep in it to-night. It would not be seemly for so many men to watch thee sleep, would it?"

She lifted her shoulders in a gesture of indifference, and avoided his hand when she rose.

Perez had unpacked the folding cot, which Lartal seldom used, preferring to rest in his blankets on the ground. The girl's first gesture was to take the blankets and place them on the soil. Then she curiously examined the metal frame of the cot, while Perez, holding a lantern aloft, stood at the entrance.

"Shall I assign a guard for this tent?" he asked.

"I'll sleep at the door and I wake easily."

Under the quizzical glance of the sergeant, Lartal drew down the canvas flaps, fastened the ropes through the brass-rimmed eyelets.

He accompanied Perez a few steps away.

"What do you think?"

"She's taking us for a pair of fools, Captain."

"Short of torturing her, Perez, what could I do?"

"Nothing."

"A man's either a savage, or he's not. And we're not at war with her people."

"There's three lads buried not far from here who don't know the difference, Captain." Perez stared into the night gloomily. The effect of the alcohol seemed to have been effaced by the excitement. "I wonder, Captain, without permitting myself to suggest anything, whether your way will be

understood, either by that fresh kid in there or her people. They're natives, and we treated her pretty well."

"While if she had been taken by Arabs——"

"Eh, eh—" Perez laughed. "Evidently—evidently."

"That's fine advice you're giving me, Perez!"

"I, Captain? I have nothing to say."

"You know what I mean——"

"Life's short. And there are a lot of men who wouldn't hesitate."

"I don't know them."

"No joking, Captain! It's almost a sin when Allah sends a man——"

"For once, I'll break the laws of the land, Perez. Thunder, where did you learn your moral principles?"

"In the Legion, Captain," Perez answered.

Lartal changed the subject brusquely.

"I'll decide in the morning whether we'll take her back."

"You're going to let her go——"

"I don't quite know."

"And the nigger, too?"

Lartal thought for a moment without replying.

"Yes. If one, the other also. I wonder whether I would be justified to kidnap, that's the literal word for it—the daughter of a man who is probably a leader among the mountain people. Such an action might pave the way for resistance to our columns, when they ultimately reach here."

"Captain——"

"Go on, Perez."

"You won't be offended if I give my frank opinion? Well, I think if we take the girl along, we'll be safe until we reach Tabelkala. If not, with

the kid out of harm's way, they may be sore because you even saw her, and come out after us."

"Yes, there's that to be considered."

"I have never known it to fail out here, Captain. If a man tries to act like a gentleman, he comes to a bad end."

"Cheerful prediction, that."

"A fellow who doesn't know how to read can't make anything out of the best book ever written. Those Arabs and Berbers are like that. We do things to impress them one way, and they take it another. Am I right?"

"I'm not sure, Perez. I'll tell you in the morning."

"Good-night, Captain."

"Wake me up around two to take a turn on watch. One of us had better stay awake all the time. Good-night."

Lartal went back to the tent, shook out his blankets, rearranged them. Hesitatingly, he approached the flap and listened. The girl's breathing, deep and regular, reached his ears.

"Asleep, or pretending. If she's really asleep she's a brave child." Standing there before the tent, he was suddenly aware that his throat was contracted, his fingers clenched over a moist palm. He grasped at the rough canvas, tugged slightly at the ropes, then bent again to listen. The same even rhythmic breathing, no rustle of cloth such as would have come to his ear, had she made the slightest start. "A cold-blooded little beast—" he commented.

Doubtless she felt secure because so far she had encountered only men who respected her, or who were within her father's power. She confidently expected to be well treated, and in the future would thank, not his restraint, but his fear.

He stood there for some time, then his grasp on the tent flap relaxed.

"Damn my irresolution——" he muttered.

He lay down, eyes wide open, and waited for Perez's call, thoughts whirling far above the brink of the cliff, spinning endlessly among the stars.

At two, he replaced Perez on guard. Seated by the smouldering brush fire, he witnessed the first skirmish of light against darkness, the false dawn. And when the new sun flamed across the glittering plateau spreading far below, he was still awake.

The *Meharistes*, awakened without need of trumpet or whistle, strolled aside in small groups for the First Prayer. Dwarfed by the background of the giant wall, and the immensity of the sky before them, they were pigmies who rose and prostrated themselves near the Source of the Cliff.

The captain, tunic open on his chest, head bare, cigarette hanging from his lips, watched them with a surge of envy. They were fortunate to unburden their souls thus before the triumph of day. He replaced the tunic with the flowing *gandoura*, buckled the military belt around his waist. About to replace the first garment in his baggage, he changed his mind, went to the tent, and tossed it between the curtains.

"To cover thee, until we find thy horse."

She would appear ridiculous, he knew, but he had not come prepared to outfit native women. Somehow, he did not like to borrow the garments of another man to place upon her, although, in the fast increasing glare, it was a matter of protection rather than modesty.

She appeared a few minutes later, wearing the coat like a cloak, the sleeves tied beneath her chin. Her face was softly flushed, and she smiled toward

him, but did not reply to his voiced greeting. Perez revealed that he also had been thinking of their prisoner's welfare. He brought an immense Saharan straw hat, the brim ornamented with tassels of red and blue.

"We'll have to rig her out someway, Captain," Perez offered, in apology. "Or the sun'll roast her."

Thus garbed, the captain regarded her critically, trying to assure himself that she was not as beautiful as he first believed. The next moment he chided himself for a hypocrite.

"Have everything in shape in ten minutes, Perez."

Then ensued the usual morning tumult. The saddle animals offered little trouble, but the pack camels, of coarser extraction, found fault with the arrangement of their loads. The oblong heads split threateningly, they gurgled and bellowed, until endearing words, kicks, curses, spaced and delivered according to ancestral traditions of beasts and drivers, had effect.

The girl was perched between two hairy water-skins atop one of the camels. The negro, still bound, marched near Tlemsani's *mehari*. Perez, who knew when to ask questions and when to remain silent, mounted, and looked expectantly at his chief.

The captain lifted his arm, and swept down, pointing south, toward the mouth of the Pass.

"Forward!" Perez called out.

"Bring the kid here," Lartal ordered. "In case we encounter any one. It's best that she be seen before we're fired upon."

This was done.

"Tlemsani," Lartal resumed. "Cut the ropes on the prisoner, and permit him to walk free beside her camel."

The negro rubbed his arms against his flanks to start the circulation of blood, and trotted forward. Lartal leaned from the saddle to speak to him.

"The horses are near the Pass?"

"Yes, Master."

"Will there be men with them?"

"No. No one will seek for us until two hours following sunrise. We came down in daylight, and we must return in daylight, for at night the sentries fire without asking questions."

The girl did not address the negro, continued to remain impassive. It was not until the detachment neared the Pass that she showed signs of interest, even of a certain perturbation. The negro, who had watched her constantly, at last spoke. Tlemsani, whom Lartal had detailed to stay near at hand and listen to what was said, translated to Lartal.

"He said, 'No need to look upward. No one knows as yet that we have been taken.' Again, he said, the second time: 'Thy father has not been warned that we were not seen with the horses at daylight. The messenger is on the way. Then, noon will come before he reaches here.'"

At the mouth of the Pass, Lartal halted.

"Where are the horses, Black?"

"Around the first bend."

"Thou'lt go and bring them here."

"Yes, Master."

The negro returned within a few minutes, mounted, leading a second horse. Both were geldings, long fetlocked, silkily black, of robust Arab breed. The guard's mount was simply equipped in red leather with brass buckles and ornaments. On the other silver gleamed, on bridle, saddle, and diminutive stirrups.

"They will die," the negro said. "If made to go far out there."

"There is no question of that," Lartal said shortly. "Dost thou remember spoken words well?"

"Very well."

"Then listen to what I say. Thou wilt so speak to thy Master, repeating these words: "I, Captain Lartal, chief of soldiers of France, found thy daughter near my camp. No harm has come to her through me or any one with me. And this I did, not through fear, but because I know that she is the daughter of a venerable man, on whose beard Allah forbid I should cast shame. If—for it so can be as all things can be that Allah wills—he does not know what men the soldiers of France are, let him but remember we are people of the Book, just as he. While we do not forgive men, we never harm women. It has been written in the Fourth Chapter of the Koran: 'Respect women.' And further in the Chapter, it has also been written: 'Covet not that which Allah hath bestowed on some of you in preference to others.' Thus, know that I greeted her like the daughter of a friend and not that of an emeny. This, so that on the day when the French come here with soldiers, thou wilt know that nought hast thou to fear, for thyself, thy daughter, thy tribe, and the daughters and women of thy tribe. Let a delegation of the white-bearded nobles come to meet us on that day, and talk at peace, if it be the will of Allah,' Hast thou heard, and canst thou remember these words, Negro?"

"Not one word following the other, as they were spoken, but their meaning I can remember and speak."

"That is well. Abd es Selim, make the camel to kneel."

The captain dismounted in turn, and walked beside the two prisoners toward the horses.

"We may go then?" the black asked, when both were mounted.

"Wait."

After the girl had mounted Lartal stepped near, wound his fingers in the black mane of her horse, and looked up into her face: "And to thee, who hears but never speaks, I have words to speak, also. That which I have said was said because I am a soldier, and my task is so to speak, to spread the fame of my nation and make it known to all. For thee, I say: Had thy father been a herder of goats, thou wouldst not be the less beautiful. Thank not the Book, nor me, but thank thine own self for safety. Had thy skin been the colour of thy soldier, thou wouldst be on the road to Tabelkala with me even at this moment. It will be long before men of my blood reach here again, so long, perhaps, that I will not be alive to be with them. We will not see each other again in our youth. So recall this: I envy thy husband."

"The peace of Allah be with thee——" she said.

He hesitated a moment, then released his grip on the mane, brought his open palm in a sharp slap on the horse's rump. He watched her until she disappeared around the bend. And he had the sensation of brutally awakening from a dream.

He came back toward Perez.

"Well, she's gone," he said.

"With your tunic, Captain——"

CHAPTER VI

"We had a rough time the past two days, ran out of water. At sunset to-day, I estimated we were near enough to make it at one stretch, and here I am," Lartal concluded.

Vasil, leaning back in his chair, appeared lost in contemplation of the engravings obtained from a weekly magazine to animate the otherwise solemn walls of the Tabelkala dining-room.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Lartal questioned.

"I think you should shave, for you have a beard like a sapper. Don't glare, old man, I'll give you the result of my meditation in due time. Taking matters in chronological order, as befits a military man accustomed to systematize all things above and below, the first point is that you won the bet——"

"Bet? That's right. I'm richer by a month's pay."

"You deserve it. Therefore, although diminished in importance by your subsequent adventures, Mr. Bu Jemma, one-time raiding chieftain, belongs to history. That shall be duly couched on paper by an agile pen, for the delectation of the staff, which will promptly send many flattering comments upon your ability. The camels, who really did the work, will go unsung."

"Open a subscription to erect a fitting monument to the loyal Bactrians."

"That's an idea—" Vasil sat up, resting his elbows on the table. "Seriously, this removes the last doubt concerning Brangin's story."

"Thank you for the indirect compliment."

"No one would accuse you of such an imagination," Vasil stated. "Frankly, is she as beautiful as Brangin claims?"

"No. I imagined someone more—ethereal, dainty. She's very much like any other good-looking Berber woman. Well-muscled, sullen eyes."

"Doubtless your acquaintance with her was more of the flesh than of the soul, Lartal. Recall that poor Brangin did not have the luck to embrace her in the darkness."

Lartal shrugged: "Little thrill. I believed I was hugging a man."

"Awhile ago, when you were telling me about it—and it happened more than two weeks ago—your eyes gleamed with a lubricous light, you exhibited what Victor Hugo would have described as 'a pulse beating upon a heart like a sledge-hammer on an anvil.'"

"Go on," Lartal urged, smiling.

"She didn't speak at all, then, aside from her parting words, a meagre harvest at best. And you, aside from the little speech for her father, said nothing?"

"I don't know what impelled me," Lartal confessed. "Before she left, I tossed off a vibrant compliment, quite in the Arab manner."

"To recapitulate; the maid comes down and is taken captive. She is guilty of the crime called espionage, punished by death while in the field. Casting out for the moment your reasons for mercy, noble one, let us ascertain the motive for her crime. Seek the man——"

"The man?" Lartal repeated. "She had never seen me, unless from afar."

"What about Brangin? She had seen him."

"Now you repeat Perez's words. If he mentioned that once during the trip, he mentioned it ten times."

"Perhaps only respect for his superiors keeps him from suggesting that she came to see him again. Vanquish your jealousy, Lartal, and be logical."

"Granted that she came to see Brangin, what sense was there in that? She could not hope to speak to him, could she?"

"Do you know so little, Lartal, that you don't know a woman may desire to see a man, and yet be offended if he speaks to her?"

"You base your statement on French women. Berbers are not embarrassed by false scruples. Better than anyone, I know that she didn't wish to be caught."

"And curiosity, what of curiosity? You cannot maintain that she had been sent out to ascertain your identity or your number. That could be learned without moving down into the plateau."

"Why should she be curious to see Brangin again?"

"A new man, a new race, dressed differently. Brass buttons, military garb, the nurse-maid and the policeman in the Saharan setting. Eight feet from the ground in the saddle, knees up, head down, your additional inches are not visible at two thousand feet."

"Right," Lartal admitted.

"We gather now that the people up there resemble the Turaeg. An Arab does not allow his daughter to roam about a men's camp. Neither does a Targui, for that matter, but the latter allows more freedom for women—enough so that she might have been able to get off with but one guard. You have been in the Senegal, the Sudan. What did you make of the black?"

his protectors, his friends, and we'd treat direct with rebels."

"Those little hitches are of no importance. You should know how the Bureau of Native Affairs will handle that. Flattery here, bribery there, and the trick is done. Moreover, in such a strong position, no danger for the French garrison. If the confederated tribes of the Draa could not take Taghit when they tried, how much chance is there for them to take that place?"

"A little flaw in the reasoning," Lartal pointed out. "We assume that the Pass is as strong now as it would be under us."

"Naturally."

"Those within know that. They will suggest that our geographical mission, diplomats included, go to the devil. That will leave the members gaping in a most silly manner at the foot of the cliff. It must be seen to be appreciated."

"Then we'll send a strong column to take it, and reign as masters instead of friends."

"Easily taken—verbally."

"We've done stunts as hard as that," Vasil maintained. "Laghoua was not an easy nut to crack, from what I've read."

"But, Vasil—take the largest column that ever operated in the south, the one that occupied Igli. A full battalion of the Foreign Legion, one of the Algerian Infantry, a platoon of *Spahis*, another of *Chasseurs d'Afrique*, a section of mountain artillery. Various irregular units. Nearly two thousand fighters. Three thousand pack camels, counting one driver to each four. In round numbers, three thousand men and five thousand animals to be fed and supplied with water. Not so bad going from Colomb-Bechar to Igli, a comparatively short

distance. Yet I have heard that officers who were along, praised Allah that it did not end in disaster. The path to the Iron Mountain is more than twice as long. Some of the water-holes could not supply a hundred men and their mounts. One or two might be dry. Imagine a horde, sixty-five per cent. men who would be new in the Sahara, trying to last until the next hole. And the artillery.—No, Vasil, it is my opinion that operations against the Iron Mountain cannot start until we have established a line of Posts halfway across the Draa."

"In 1591 the central Plateau was crossed by a Moroccan army of four thousand men, with artillery, on the way to conquer Timbuktu. There were Europeans among them, Spanish renegades and others," Vasil argued.

"The desert was not what it has become, and those men were tougher than any we have now, selected adventurers, survivors of years of piracy, or natives of Africa. Suppose our men did, by a miracle, reach the Pass.—If the enemy had but one hundred riflemen to scatter on its flanks, they could hold back a division. After a few dozens had bit the dust, the morale would sink to zero. It isn't comforting to have death from lead before, and death from thirst behind."

"You're logical, Lartal, when you get on things you know. What would you suggest?"

"Patience. Constant approach by degrees, attempts to find a short cut. Or again—a detachment of forty or fifty, well armed, men picked by hand as it were, which would get near the cliff without being observed, marching nights, hiding days. Finally a quick ascent of the Pass on foot, in the dark. After that, massacre or parley."

"I have been asked for suggestions," Vasli said.

"Will you sign something of the sort, in the general line of what you have just spoken?"

"Certainly."

"It may get you into hot water. You had forseen all the difficulties. You did not err from ignorance when you gave up the woman presumed to be the daughter of an important man. Negotiations would have been opened, the girl held in the north somewhere until our terms could be presented."

"They would have taken it for granted that she was dishonoured, and hated us. If I had brought her back, or tried to, I'd have been attacked on the way and no detachment of ours within miles of the cliff would have been safe."

"The fact is that you fell hard," Vasil declared, "though you won't admit it, and, like the good, stern fool that you are, you played the noble band leader and released her, for the reward of her smile and her adoration until the end of time. Negative reward, as you'll find out."

"I don't fight women," Lartal retorted.

"The heart of a knight beneath the humble cloth of a captain's tunic! You are right. The combat would not be equal, on any field—" Vasil reached across the table, tapped Lartal's arm: "Did she steal everything, even your sense of humour?"

Lartal relaxed, and laughed. "She took the tunic," he said, and added an explanation of how his braided coat had vanished.

"Some day, an explorer of the future—you see I take your opinion seriously—will discover a garment ornamented at sleeves and shoulders with the insignia of captain, bearing on the left breast the red ribbon and rosette of the Legion of Honour, the Colonial medal with Sudan and Sahara clasps, and

the Nicham of Tunis. I should like to see his report of the event——"

"Oh, it will be identified easily. My name is inked on the inside of the collar."

.

Lartal was accustomed to long trips into the desert. But he could never quite escape the aftermath, the unrest, the urge to be mounting and moving on. Invariably it was one or two days before he quieted to normal, accepted routine. Therefore he did not fret greatly the following morning when he found time hanging heavily on his hands.

He went to the stables, according to the tradition of grouchy officers. His appearance there caused consternation. He had changed overnight, or so it appeared to the native soldiers, from an understanding chief to a steely-eyed martinet, who sought for flaws, minute matters of detail enforced in the peaceful barracks of France, but by tacit agreement holding little place in Saharan affairs. The mechanism of a carbine, too scantily greased, a badly mended saddle, brought sharp reproof.

The astonished Perez, emerging glowingly warm from the intimacy of the open to an icy shower of reproaches, held himself stiffly under the storm, bit his lips, saluted.

"Yes, Captain. Yes, Captain. Understood, Captain. I thought I was doing right, Captain."

"I'll do the thinking, Perez——"

"Yes, Captain."

Before the worried startled look in the former Legionaire's eyes, Lartal was stirred to remorse.

"After all, there's no cause to howl, Perez—You've done well considering—I'm not feeling right."

The following day, Lartal awoke to find his gloom still deep. He made a better struggle, and succeeded

in concealing his inner irritation from all save Vasil.

"That report," Vasil asked at lunch, "coming along?"

"No. Can't seem to get at it."

Vasil nodded with deep understanding, and dispatched Halef for pen and paper.

"I'll make a draft, you answer questions——"

The report made out roughly, Lartal copied it, trimming it here and there, and signed it.

"That's off your mind now, Lartal——"

Lartal smiled gratefully: "Vasil, I don't know what's come into me. My body seems all nerves, my brain a soggy mass of aching tissue."

"What do you think about? I mean, what is your particular grievance against the universe? Confess it, no matter how ridiculous. Brooding is not good out here."

"I know, Vasil. I'm dissatisfied."

"Where would you wish to be?"

"Nowhere."

"You pine for France?"

"Lord, no!"

"Stomach, eyes, sound? Often one imagines a physical ailment as a mental disease."

"I never felt healthier in my life."

"It's serious, then. You're at the start of a long slide, with drink on the way, and a padded cell at the bottom. I have seen others—as for myself, I braced in time. Learn to forget."

"I have nothing to fret about, Vasil."

"You won't admit it, even to yourself. I have an idea what it is, though."

"As a favour, tell me."

"No. One or two things would happen, if I put it into words. You'd recover soon, and be ashamed that we mentioned it, which would make us both

embarrassed. Or you'd slide quicker. Understand me—and try to profit."

The weeks passed. Outwardly, Captain Lartal had regained his poise, dropped back into the smooth groove of habit. He piloted small patrols of *Meharistes* on the outskirts of the Raouy Dunes near Tabelkala, returned to his cot at night worn out physically, but with the same mournful, crackling emptiness in his brain, the sensation of an unsatisfied longing gnawing endlessly.

For the first time he knew the torture of weary limbs and wakeful brain. He remembered what other men had told him, and understood them better. The disease of the desert, the infinite nostalgia for the unattainable, was gripping him. He, who had faced dangers, shunned the formulation of his thoughts, fearful that the demon lurking within him, once acknowledged, would grow in strength and consume him. He knew it, that invisible pale spectre that roams with the night wind through the barracks of the Foreign Legion, those immense monasteries of adventurers, where men who have tasted the joys of the world are cloistered after the torrid sun has set.

A victim, the private of the Penal Detachment, thrown into the grim existence of the camp fresh from life in Paris. Victim, also, the sergeant, who had won his stripes at the cost of years of patience and discipline, of heroism, and who risked all for one spree in the dives of the native quarter.

He fought his battle silently. Then, one night when he awoke from a fitful sleep, he heard, melodious and rhythmical, the chanting of a Berber *Mehariste :*

" *Tera inh tamott ur budet,*
R'im taj dinh ful as essar'et——
Der' ijij y kaye teouihalet. . . ."

There were other stanzas, but this recurred persistently, like a bright spot on a dark spinning disc, until the words, uttered in *tamahek* dialect, separated and identified themselves, one by one——

"The love of woman wants not eternal presence before her—Sooner remain away awhile—In the distance will she yearn for thee——"

.

With the bodily exhilaration of a convalescent, Lartal resumed his work with a show of interest.

It was not long before the entire detachment could pass by in splendid order, camels in step as regular as cavalry horses, noncoms stationed at proper intervals. Rifle competitions were organised.

Vasil gave him a free hand in the purchasing of camels. The slow animals were gradually weeded out, disposed of to passing caravans, and the proceeds employed to buy selected saddle-mounts. Without great expenditure, Lartal found himself possessed of beasts that could compare as a whole with the best mounted band of raiders.

The discipline, allowable in regular army corps, was unfit for men born in the open, fiercely resentful of interference. To cramp the inherited instincts of the nomads was poor policy. He permitted groups to go out unsupervised, for short distances, allaying thus the craving for freedom. The net result, no man deserted even though the wide open land offered safety for the fugitive.

The military situation was quiet. The raiders had heard of the crushing of Bu Jemma. The territory depending upon the Tabelkala detachment for protection was peaceful. On occasion a group of natives would present itself before the Fort, and members would be received cordially by Vasil and Lartal, and the base of future agreements laid.

Among these casual visitors, Lartal recognised from time to time men he had seen farther East, on the Tripolitan border, or in Timbuktu. They greeted him without surprise, for it was natural that desert men should meet anywhere in the Desert.

Topics of the land were discussed at length. As the desert men spoke, their deep pupils seemed to reflect the immense horizons they had gazed upon, the tawny spread of the Sudanese steppe, the golden infinite of the Iguidi. He visited the hastily established camps near the ruined walls of the oasis, ate roast sheep with his fingers, dipped his right hand in steaming millet. He entertained them on the veranda, serving cups of burning tea, in which great chips from a sugar loaf were melted. Several days, these exchanges of courtesy, then, one morning when the sun rose, the tents would have vanished during the night.

A courier broke into the placid atmosphere.

Vasil was informed that a lieutenant was being sent to second him, another to second Lartal. Three noncoms were also bound for Tabelkala. With Vasil, Lartal, Perez and the three sergeants present, the Fort would total eleven Europeans. Vasil immediately considered ways and means to accommodate them, and was hesitant to declare himself pleased by the prospect of new company.

"That means that Brangin is out for good," Lartal said, "—so far as this detachment is concerned."

"Yes," Vasil agreed. "I learn here that he will be assigned definitely as commander of the escort for the geographical mission to the Pass."

"Then, my detachment will not serve as escort?"

"No." Vasil hesitated: "I don't know whether

this is good or bad news for you." He held out a paper.

Order was given to Captain Lartal to leave Tabelkala immediately upon the arrival of the lieutenant, to proceed north to Colomb-Bechar. A personal letter from the Colonel accompanied the matter-of-fact order:

"My dear Lartal:

It occurred to me that you had been stationed in the east formerly, and that you might not be altogether sorry to find yourself on familiar ground again. There is a recrudescence of agitation near Ouargla, spreading to the Tripolitan Border. From various indications, our friends, the Senussis, are at work. It would be a shame to assign some incapable man to a post that you are eminently fitted to fill. What the government seeks, is a man who like you, can understand, and understanding, act. A thinker and a doer. You will not be confined to one spot, another point that may please your roving soul.

"Foremost among your many tasks will be to locate a certain El Haj Omar ben Azziz. The emissaries of the Senussis have settled in the region like a flight of locusts. Naturally, you will have to ascertain whether or not he speaks against us. He has been seen, but no proof of agitation can be traced to him.

"As soon as you reach here I'll see you and we'll have a long talk. If you can read between the lines, you know about what your chief mission will be. If successful, which I do not doubt you will be, your promotion to the rank of major will be but a matter of routine. I am aware that this will be the least of your motives in accepting, but it doesn't hurt to know, after all."

Followed the signature. Lartal handed the letter to Vasil:

" The fact that an outsider is called in shows that those on the spot are at their wit's end. And there are men in Ouargla who could teach me much about that particular work. Moreover, what do I know about the Senussis that is not general knowledge ? "

" You know as much as anyone," Vasil retorted. " What do we know ? We look at a still pond in the woods. Bubbles rise. There's something stirring underneath, but all one sees is bubbles. We have a pond called the Sahara, on which foam little bubbles called emissaries. With your luck you should be able to get this Omar, especially as the means will be more or less in your hands. You're thirty-two—a major at thirty-three—figure the usual thirteen years from that rank to brigadier-general at forty-six ! Don't tell me that you'd prefer a few months of my company to a great future,—" Vasil concluded.

" I presume it is a stroke of luck," Lartal agreed.

" Note, by the way, that although the colonel couches his note gently, the order is peremptory. You have no choice, poor devil that you are. I know where the rub comes in : You have whipped your men together and you expected to accomplish great things. And it turns out that you've been working for someone else. That always hurts a bit, no matter how altruistic one may be."

" When will the lieutenant coming to replace me reach here ? "

" In a week or so. He left at the same time as this despatch, and the courier cannot have gained much more than that on him."

The library of Tabelkala offered meagre information on the Senussis. Nevertheless, he brushed up on the subject, although without inner enthusiasm. His mind strayed from the blue-covered booklets, and the paragraphs he scanned appeared

devoid of meaning. As Vasil said, opportunity had rapped, yet he was not elated. An invincible desire to remain at Tabelkala held him. Just why, he could not have told at the time. A brief order breaking up his circle of friends was nothing new. He had been forced to leave at a day's notice men with whom he had shared pleasures and sorrows for months. And never had he grumbled. Never had he felt an unknown chain binding him anywhere as securely as the walls of Tabelkala.

The next evening he went to the oasis to talk with Tlemsani. He had a half-formed plan to ask that the Arab act as his assistant in the new undertaking. Although scrupulous in his religious duties, ready to prostrate himself in prayer at the right hour, Tlemsani revealed a certain streak of scepticism rare in a man of his breed.

He questioned Tlemsani deftly at first, then was soon compelled to abandon secrecy before the evasive answers.

"Hast thou heard of El Haj Omar?" he challenged.

"The Tukuleur who was slain by the Hebbu tribesmen of the Bandiagra region so many years ago?"

"No. A living man, Omar ben Azziz——"

Tlemsani's face did not change, although Lartal thought he discerned a certain hardening of the pupils, sensed that the name struck a responsive chord.

"Who is he, Captain?"

"One of the Senussi Brotherhood, thou dost know."

"What of him?"

"He is south of Ouargla. I may be asked to find him."

"South of Ouargla, Captain—that is far from here."

"Wilt thou come with me?"

"If thou dost ask me, yes."

"I do ask thee."

"I will go."

Later, Lartal resumed:

"Thou dost not fear to offend the Senussi, Tlemsani?"

"I am a soldier of the French."

"There are those who are soldiers of the French, and yet—" the captain paused meaningly, indicated with a lift of his chin the camel-guards around the other fires: "Among those, I'll warrant, there is one or even more who would not hesitate between us and the others——"

"I know not, Captain. But even were that the case, how could the event arise? The Senussis are not warriors, but teachers. Their weapon is the word and not the sword."

"I ask thee no more than can be told me, Tlemsani. It is agreed that thou wilt come with me?"

"I have already consented."

"Perhaps, from speech overheard here and there, thou hast already some knowledge to impart to me?"

"I have no knowledge to impart. Thou sayest: 'Omar is south of Ouargla, come with me to find him.' I say I will, though it is far and he may not be found there."

"I spoke to thee as an old and respected friend, Tlemsani. My words go no further?"

"Allah is my witness, no."

Lartal rose and paced restlessly. Tlemsani was irritating with his reticence, his evasions. The captain had dealt with Arabs sufficiently long to

know when a man implied more than he said. Tlemsani, by carefully repeating Lartal's own words, had deliberately avoided committing himself to a direct answer regarding Omar.

He moved away from the fires. The solitude and the cool of the night was gratifying. His brain seemed to clear.

" Tlemsani knows something of Omar. If I take him along, in due time he will speak. Right here is no place to question him. He fears that he will be overheard. I was right when I said that some of our men were implicated in the Senussi movement—that's a matter of common sense. Yet he appeared to be warning me about something. Hard to decide whether it is my imagination or not. Once away from Tabelkala——"

He turned back, toward the fires.

The group of huddled forms in blue or white cloaks moved long arms in slow gestures. In the frame of a neckcloth, a profile was thrown into relief, a glimpse of high cheekbones, the oblong block of a beard. Behind, the palms formed a wall of obscurity, chiselled at the crest by the rustling leaves of the tallest trees.

" Away from Tabelkala—" he murmured. " Why the devil should I shiver at the idea ? What is there here to hold me back ? Vasil—a fine chap, but I have left as good without hesitation, with only a passing regret. Perez, my men—? I knew I was not wedded to them. Nothing resembles a good detachment like another good detachment. Yet I sense that every step away from Tabelkala will drive a nail into the coffin of something I should keep alive. I sense that I have not finished—that I was just beginning."

A tentative note, a shrill prelude, and the whine of a flute lifted. One of the *Meharistes* on camel-guard

was playing, the same man who had played that night at the foot of the cliff across the Draa. The same man, playing the same tune.

It had been just such a night as this, and the shadow of the palm grove was as deep now as the shadow thrown by the cliff. In the air drifted the same odour of burning roots. The wind had been as cool upon his skin. Impressions evoked by the notes of the flute drifted across his memory, reconstructing with startling exactitude the "feeling" of that other night, now sunk many nights into the past.

It had been a saner, more wholesome man who had crawled out with Tlemsani, a man devoid of perturbations, who saw but a single purpose. Perhaps felt fear, shrank from the ring of steel on rock, but one whose life was straight as the flight of a dart, with but a single path to follow.

That man would have left Tabelkala for the east without hesitation, would have held the slip of paper, thus ordering him, sacred. No question would have risen in his mind.

Something had occurred.

What?

. . . A faint odour of musk floating ahead, the touch of his hand upon flesh. . . .

He passed a hand over his moist forehead. His heart beat faster.

He could hide from himself no longer. Vasil had guessed, and he, himself, had known and kept silent unwilling to share his thoughts. The spell of depression that had threatened his mind, she had caused it, the woman who had no name. Why? He could not comprehend. He had been surrounded by his own fighting men, had held her prisoner. Had he desired her as he did now, nothing could have halted

him. From the depth of his soul, he knew that he had not desired her, then.

Desire had come later, much later. Ten days, two weeks afterward, the night preceding his arrival at Tabelkala.

For the first time, his mind had lingered on that brief moment, during which he had hesitated, after discovering that he held a woman. Sensations that he had not been aware of at the time had emerged—the cool of her flesh beneath his warm palm. He had called out to the sentries, warned them not to fire, lifted her in his arms.

He had held close a firm yet yielding form, had felt the contact of her flesh against his chest; the perfume had filled his nostrils, his lips had pressed into her hair. He recalled her first instinctive struggle, the convulsive clutch of her small hand on his arm. Still recalled—even at the thought, the blood seemed to rush to the spot, to isolate it from the rest of his flesh, as if seared by a branding iron.

He compared himself now with other officers who had desired native women with more than a surface desire. Love for a native woman he had not understood. The passing contact of the flesh he admitted, for he was young and had lived always in the world of young men. To be obsessed by the memory of a woman not of his race tortured him with shame as much as with longing.

Lartal had seen the notes following the names of other officers: "Lieutenant X . . . , a good officer, studious, but openly in *liaison* with a native woman." A tragedy in a few words, a man leading one life by day, another by night, half ashamed under the glance of natives. There were others who had "little friends," but did not take them seriously, were ready, for the sake of advancement to forsake a mere

pastime. Of those, no one complained. The sin was to become too absorbed.

The captain was encountering the test later in life than most men, yet was unprepared to meet it. Who could tell how much Perez's words had gone toward creating in his brain the upheaval? He met the issue squarely, admitted his obsession, and rejoiced that it was carnal, not mental.

The supreme folly would be spared him without effort of his own. Between himself and the next step down were the orders he had received, creating an immense distance, as distances are considered in a primitive land. Truly no man had ever been luckier than he: hundreds of miles of drought-struck land, and at the end scores of rifles in the hands of experts, to defend him from himself.

He went back and sat down beside Tlemsani, who looked into his eyes gravely, offered him the bowl of his pipe to light his cigarette.

CHAPTER VII

" HALT ! "

The ringing challenge of a sentry cutting through the darkness always brings a certain dramatic suspense. At Tabelkala, it was poignant, hinted of danger.

Vasil looked up from the letter he was writing. Lartal closed the book over one finger. The lamp gurgled and sobbed in the stillness.

" Nothing," Vasil remarked with irritation. " Some sentry suddenly awakening."

" No—listen——"

Shrill voices could be heard, as if someone were outside the enclosure, shouting to the guards. The sentry hailed the sergeant on duty, whose lantern swung rapidly across the yard toward the North Gate.

" The lieutenant to succeed you, perhaps—" Vasil volunteered.

" He'd have an escort and we'd have heard them approaching long ago."

Vasil stepped out upon the verandah, leaned over the railing.

" I hear the sergeant bawling out somebody."

" I'll see—" Lartal suggested, picking up his *kepi*.

" Don't—if they find they can disturb you at all hours, they'll be yelling all the time. I'll send for the sergeant later, find out what it was about."

Lartal tried to resume reading. Before his attention settled back upon the exhilarating prose of " Researches upon the origin and migrations of

the Principal Tribes of Africa," Halef, the orderly, entered, executed an impeccable salute.

"Captain!"

"What?" Vasil asked.

"Sergeant asks to speak with thee right away."

"Alone, is he?"

"Another man, too."

"Let them in."

Halef stepped to the door and beckoned. The sergeant, a short blonde fellow, preceded the new arrival into the room. Both officers were disappointed to recognise him merely as one of the *Meharistes* from the camel-guard.

"What's the meaning of all this row, Sergeant?"

"This fellow insisted on coming to you. The corporal on duty down below has given him a message."

"All right. You may go, Sergeant." Then to the *Mehariste:* "Thou! What is it that cannot be delayed until morning?"

"This——"

The private stretched his hand forward, offered a slip of paper folded double. Lartal watched idly as Vasil spread it on the table, noted Arabic characters scrawled upon the exposed face.

"*To the venerated Captain at Tabelkala, to be given into his hands as soon as God wills,*" Vasil read it aloud: "Who wrote this? The Corporal?"

"No, Captain. Look on the other side."

Vasil turned the paper over.

"Thunder of God!" he exclaimed. He held the message out toward Lartal: "Forgive me for reading your correspondence!"

The paper was thick and glossy, and the writing in very good French.

"*If Captain Lartal is the man we believe him to be,*

he will heed this call, for his own enlightenment and for the service of his Motherland. At the two sandstone pillars a day's journey from Tabelkala, he will be expected, inside forty-eight hours of the delivery of this note. We rely upon his known loyalty to come with but the strictly necessary escort, and, in case it is impossible for him to come, not to make use of this information for another purpose. In any case we offer to Captain Lartal the expression of our sincere gratitude, and pray that God shall always have him in his keeping."

"What do you make of it?" Vasil asked.

"It's a mighty weak joke to play."

"Who'd play it on you?"

"You, naturally."

"Why?"

"I don't know. But who else? Perez? Unlikely. If Brangin were here—but he is not."

"Without resenting the doubtful compliment to my sanity," Vasil resumed. "I'll set your mind at ease as far as I am concerned. My jokes are intelligent, plausible. I give you my word of honour that I have never seen this paper, that I did not have anything to do with it."

"Pardon me," Lartal said, apologetically.

"I'll ask this fellow," Vasil turned to the *Mehariste:* "How did this come into thy hands?"

"The corporal gave it to me."

"We know that. But before?"

"We were around the fires, as every night. Some were already asleep, the others were smoking while awaiting time to rest. From nowhere, a stick was thrown at us, smote the corporal on the shoulder. This paper was tied with twine around the stick."

"And the sentries? Were they asleep?"

"No, Captain. Yet they heard nothing."

"Didn't the corporal look for the man who had thrown the stick?"

"Yes, We all took our carbines and went out of the camp. We found nothing."

"And that is all?"

"No. After we were seated again, and all talking at once, a voice hailed us, told us to take this to the Fort right away. Again, we ran out with the carbine, but this time we heard only the sound of a camel running away, already far."

"Why didn't you shoot? We heard nothing."

"The captain—" the private glanced toward Lartal, "—has forbidden us to fire unless we see the target. He said that shots fired blindly wasted ammunition."

"One time when you were too well obeyed, Lartal."

Vasil dismissed the messenger.

"What is your opinion?"

"Who can write French out here? I mean, such French——"?

"A former member of our native cavalry."

"The writing is too precise for that, at the same time too individual. It was written spontaneously, without hesitation."

"There have been deserters from the Foreign Legion from Posts in this region. I don't say that a Christian would have survived among natives. Suppose a Turkish deserter, an Egyptian—there are all sorts in the Legion——"

"I know this was written by a Frenchman," Lartal declared.

"How do you arrive at such certainty?"

"Instinct, partly. Also the use of *sa patrie* (his motherland) instead of 'his country.' That term is ours."

"An Italian, a Spaniard, a half-dozen other nationalities, might employ the term."

"But not a Mohammedan. And you know what chance an Infidel would have to convert himself to Islam before his neck was sliced in this country."

"You're breaking up your own solution right there, Lartal."

"I guess I am. One thing is sure: That fellow, whoever he is, is not on good terms with us or he'd have come openly and spoken his piece like a little man. Do you know of any officer who went wrong around here?"

"No. There were one or two who disappeared, but on each occasion reports came from good sources they had been killed. It is within the realm of possibility that a native educated in French schools has drifted here."

"All conjecture."

"Of course," Vasil agreed.

"What could I do, unescorted, for the service of the motherland? On what would I be enlightened? What sort of a man am I believed to be—to explain the first line?"

"Evidently, quite a nice sort of fellow, worthy of trust." Vasil smiled: "Come on, Lartal, why do you hide what you really think? 'The expression of our sincere gratitude.' To whom have you done service?"

"How do I know?"

"How do you know! And the restitution, intact and blooming, of the fair child to a presumably worthy sire, have you forgotten that?"

"I had thought of it," Lartal admitted. "Yet a man so patently desirous to conceal his identity would not have given me such a clue. He'd either

have come out frankly, or kept silent. No, we can't look there for the solution."

"Any other reason, Lartal?"

"Yes," Lartal confessed, impulsively. "You may have guessed easily enough that I would give my right hand to meet her again. And it would be too much to expect that the opportunity would drop from the clouds."

"The efficacy of prayer, old man."

"I don't know much about such things, Vasil, but I have heard that Venus is a deaf divinity."

"From which I gather that your sentiments are more fitted to be understood and gratified through the offices of Pan, rather than the ministrations of cherubs?"

"Precisely. To be sung by Baudelaire rather than Lamartine." Lartal tapped the paper with his index: "And thus, Vasil, I dare not hope. No, believe me, the solution is simpler."

"Outline, please, with proper marginal notes for my dull bean."

"All right. We're dealing with a renegade. Like most men he is subject to homesickness, craves the sight of the village steeple, the pastoral quiet of Europe. Plain deserter, or man with some other crime hanging over him, he wants to make terms with us, try to buy his way back. He'll consent to serve us as a sort of spy among the tribes, to be rehabilitated and pardoned."

"And why does he say 'we'?" Vasil asked.

"May have a companion. Maybe to throw us off the track. Such fools deem themselves much better remembered than they really are. Six or seven years ago, while in the Central Sahara, I commanded a small post, where I had a section of the African Penal Battalion with my cavalrymen. They're a

tough crowd, those former jail-birds purging their sins in the disciplinary sections. I have taken the more worthy among them and stiffened their morale a bit, had them transferred into the Zouaves. They wrote me long effusions later. Gratitude, undying faith, ready to be killed for my sake, all more or less sincere. That would explain the gratitude."

"Did you ever make an enemy among them?"

"Very likely. Those who tried to impose on me jumped through the hoops. I have been promised, a couple of times, a few slugs through the back."

"Presume we have a gentleman clever enough to escape, join the natives, embrace Islam so swiftly that he was able to keep his head on his shoulders—one resolute enough to have attended to the necessary rite in advance—and who would have cause to remember you in unfavourable fashion. He attains among the natives sufficient influence to have messengers sent out at his request. He coaxes you out to meet him, almost alone. Then manages to spend an afternoon letting you know, in no uncertain manner, exactly how much he resents your former behaviour."

"You're manufacturing a Corsican vendetta."

"As plausible as your sympathetic deserter who craves home."

"What would you do?"

"I'd waive his compliments, and go forth with the whole detachment. If he means well, he'll take a chance and wait. If not, he'll know the game is up."

"What about my orders to leave upon the arrival of the lieutenant?"

"Forty-eight hours, more or less——"

"You have a way of interpreting orders, Vasil!"

"Well, do you believe I wish to stay here with my

mouth dried with curiosity ? If you prefer, I'll trot out myself. I must know the final word of the enigma. Anyway, I'm your immediate superior, although you don't appear to be much impressed by the fact, and I'd authorise you in writing."

" Thanks. I'll think it over. You're right. It should be cleared up."

" The lieutenant coming to take your place, judging from the name, is not familiar with this part of the Sahara. He'll probably be on the way two or three days more than we expect—or at least we can figure that way now. You leave in the morning. At nightfall, you're at the pillars—you either find your man or don't. If you do, an evening's conversation should be enough for you to find out what's up. You start back, are here by sunset day after tomorrow. If the lieutenant arrives in the meanwhile, I attend to the packing of your belongings, have everything in readiness, we shake hands and off you go with only twenty-four hours' delay, which you can make up between here and Igli by travelling faster than otherwise. You lose nothing, and you may leave me a precious informer."

" And I gain two days in the saddle preceding a long trip, which you recommend me to make in record-breaking time."

" Oh," Vasil pointed out, " I can bribe you. In exchange for your fatigue, I shall note you in my next official report as : ' A tireless, energetic officer, giving proof of rare initiative and total forgetfulness of self in the carrying out of duty. On the eve of his departure, took his detachment on a prolonged reconnoitring trip, to leave to his successor an alert, efficient group.' "

" Magnificent. Cheap at the price of liniment. Agreed ! "

Vasil raced downstairs, was back again with a sheaf of maps.

"We'll trace your course. Here, marked elegantly by Brangin, are the pillars. Note the precision of the pen strokes! Thirty-five, forty kilometres at most."

"I better send word to the guards at the oasis to have fresh camels at the Fort in the morning."

"We'll send the man back."

Vasil despatched Halef to bring in the *Mehariste*.

The *Mehariste* entered, and spoke before Lartal could address him.

"I have forgotten to give thee this, Captain. It was within the paper, caught against the stick."

A swarthy forearm jutted from the loose sleeve, long, brown fingers opened, and dropped something upon the table. Little bits of ribbon, of various colours, one red, one blue and white, the other the emblem of the Nicham of Tunis. Lartal, mute with surprise and violent emotion, twisted the stuff between thumb and fingers. He recognised, on the scarlet strip of the Legion of Honour, the minute tear made by a clumsy orderly.

"Tlemsani is with the camel-guards to-night?" he asked the *Mehariste*.

"Yes, Captain."

"Thou wilt tell him that I want him here at dawn, bringing *Tarut* for me and a fast beast for himself. Go."

Vasil seized him by the elbow: "Listen, old man —I suggest——"

Lartal laughed nervously.

"Suggest away, Vasil."

"I won't try to stop you. Take more men——"

"Why?" Lartal shrugged and laughed again: "The efficacy of prayer, Vasil, the efficacy of prayer!"

CHAPTER VIII

"SOMEONE," Tlemsani announced. "And others behind."

Lartal followed his outstretched hand, distinguished in the luminous haze to the west a tall silhouette, a man atop a racing camel. Behind, sunlight spilled by polished metal revealed a strong escort, as yet too distant to be counted or identified.

For almost an hour, Lartal and his companion had been seated by the fire, beside the rising column of smoke that hugged the flank of the great pillar looming above them to shred at its crest into the sky like a vaporous gray shroud. Rising fifty to sixty feet above the level of the plateau, the pointed rocks jutting into the blue had been visible for many miles —the long shadows thrown by the giant needles of sandstone had sped across the mirror-smooth surface to meet them. The captain, seeking in vain for sign of those he had come to meet, had been disappointed.

"They'll come," Tlemsani assured him. "So soon as they see that we are alone."

As the newcomer approached, Lartal was first struck with admiration for his *mehari*, an immense, long-limbed beast, snow white, coat gleaming like silk, shimmering with each movement of the muscular haunches. The man tapped the animal's neck lightly, and the camel knelt to permit the rider to dismount.

He was tall, wrapped in swathing blue cotton-cloth from head to knees, wearing the long trousers and the sandals of the Tuareg. Around his head

was wound the green turban showing that he had once gone on a pilgrimage to Mecca, was therefore a *haji*. He had left his carbine hanging to the cross-piece of the saddle, and walked slowly, right hand raised in token of friendship.

"Greetings, Captain Lartal!" he called in Arabic.

"Peace comes with thee," the captain replied.

The *haji* sat by the fire, lowered the veil he had flung across his face. A gaunt, bronzed face, a grayish beard. Lartal looked at him curiously, and started: The eyes shone between the ridge of the brows and a deep gash in reddened, puckered flesh; the nose was split in half, no effort had been made to bring the jagged, gaping lips of the wound together. Sometime, somewhere, he had caught the sharp edge of a sword across the face. He was not prepossessing.

"Greetings, Ahmed el Kabih," Tlemsani said.

"Greetings to thee, though I do not know thee."

"We met in Ghadames, where the Turkish doctor tried to mend thy face."

"That was many years ago." Ahmed turned to Lartal deliberately to end Tlemsani's reminiscences: "Thou hast come unescorted. That is well."

"Thou art not a man to know French," Lartal offered. "Hence, the message did not come from thee."

"He who wrote it is far from here."

"Then speak for him."

"I shall lead thee to him."

"Quickly, in that case. I must return to the Fort to-morrow."

"If Allah wills. That is unlikely, as it will be many days' travel to reach him, as many to return, if he permits thee to return."

Lartal's hand met the hard butt of the service revolver in the holster at his right, an instinctive gesture.

"I come in good faith," Lartal protested. "Yet I am to be made prisoner, perhaps harmed."

"No. My head answers for the safety of thine. Only thy camel might be shot."

"It was thou who brought the message to Tabelkala, Ahmed?"

"It was I."

"Who sent it?"

"That and many things will be told thee in due time." Ahmed smiled, subtly ironical: "A child takes his first step, and must walk erect the rest of his life. Thus, as thou didst come this far, we go further."

He rose, walked to meet a group of a dozen riders, which had approached swiftly.

"Thou hast seen him before, Tlemsani, who is he?"

"He is not of the Iron Mountain, that I know. He is a rover, a 'drinker of space,' like myself. In Ghadames he had arrived with many others, fresh from a combat against the Tebbus near Chad, in which they gleaned more steel than gold. What he is doing here, Allah knows."

"Is he a good man?"

"Good and evil, like all men."

The riders had dismounted. The majority, Lartal noted, were Arabs or Berbers, but four were negroes, each one large and powerful, each resembling the other, and all four resembling the black captured by Tlemsani, near the Cliff.

These descendants of Ham were beautifully equipped. Fine cloaks of white wool, lined with green and gold, broad belts of green bristling with

the handles of knives and revolvers, a Lebel carbine slung across the back. Their camels, little less perfect than that of the surly Ahmed, were saddled with red leather, ornamented with shining brass plaques and dangling gold tassels. These blacks, obviously, were to be Lartal's guards, for the leader of the four immediately secured his revolver. At the same time, he exhibited respect, mumbled an apology.

"Thy name?" Lartal asked.

"Messaoud."

"Well, Massaoud, where do these fine *mehara* come from?"

The black grinned, but did not reply.

"He is not to answer questions," Ahmed interrupted. "I will tell thee. The males that sired them came from the Ahaggar and the Touat. They are fine camels." Ahmed's lips twisted with a grimace of pride: "Eh, thou never hast seen such beautiful ones!"

"One by one, yes. But never sixteen together."

"All thy soldiers could never catch us," Ahmed boasted. "They would be cows seeking to beat antelopes. Enough speech. We must go."

"What of my follower?"

Ahmed looked toward Tlemsani, gestured his deep indifference.

"I have not been told. He can go back if he likes."

Lartal produced a notebook and pencil. He wished to send Tlemsani to Tabelkala with a message for Captain Vasil. The *Mehariste* guessed his intention.

"Permit me to go with thee, Captain," he pleaded.

"Yes," Ahmed broke in. "Better come with us than eat the salt of the Infidel. Thou wert a true man once."

"How far do we go, Ahmed?" Lartal asked.

"Thou dost know well, Captain."

Ahmed replaced the veil over his face. Lartal mounted, and the blacks immediately surrounded him.

Before long the pillars were left behind, vanished in the purple east.

Something that had long held the captain's soul taut and ill at ease seemed to snap. He breathed deeper, the blood sang in his veins, an extraordinary elation took possession of him, a strange biting mirth.

Behind him at Tabelkala, waited duty. For the first time in fourteen years he was a free man! Toward sundown of the following day he had the very definite impression that at this very hour the relief lieutenant was presenting himself before the North Gate. From now on he would be expected momentarily to appear at Colomb-Bechar.

Naturally, when he did return, if it was his lot to return, he would have much to explain, would perhaps find himself in disgrace. But now disgrace seemed a remote and tiny thing——

Tlemsani was happy also. He, too, was engaging upon a new venture. Among the companions of Ahmed he discovered men who had also wandered from shore to shore of the Waterless Sea. He sat with them, exchanging tales of slashes and thrusts, attacks and pursuits. The bodies of these cameleers bore indelible marks of the recent story of North Africa. Here, the cast-iron slug from a muzzle-loading musket of a negro fighting for freedom; again, the great scar of a British dumdum bullet earned in Egypt, fighting for the Faith; elsewhere, the elongated, livid seam of a sabre stroke delivered by a French cavalryman in a forgotten skirmish.

Cheerful, daring men, who resembled closely the hard-fighting soldiers of the Middle Ages, the soldiers of the Great Campaigns, the professional cut-throats the Thirty Years' War left wandering the length and breadth of Europe.

The four negroes, left aside by the others, formed a distinct group. Their watch over the captain was never obtrusive. They cooked their own food, occupied a separate fire, and talked together in the peculiar mixture of Berber and Arabic, which Lartal was beginning to understand.

Ahmed, cautious in spite of the friendliness he now showed, forbade Lartal to take observation, to trace his course. He was forced to content himself with general indications such as were supplied by the sun during the day, the stars at night. Ahmed found water-holes where no water-holes were supposed to exist, seemed to know where to find forage.

On the fourth day a group of strange riders appeared in the distance, and set in pursuit. In the space of a few hours, they had been left behind.

"Who were those men, Ahmed?" Lartal asked.

"Ait Khebbashes. We could have stopped and fought them, but I feared that a bullet would seek thee out—thus losing my own head. There is a time to fight and a time to flee."

Sooner than Lartal had expected, the Cliff was before them.

Ahmed declared that they must wait until morning before presenting themselves, and the party camped at the Source.

"To-morrow we part," Ahmed said.

"Why?"

"We are not allowed to go farther than the crest of the cliff. There, these men alone—" he indicated the negroes—"will escort thee to thy destination."

" It is well. Though I shall be sorry to part from thee."

" Allah is my witness, Captain, I did but obey in bringing thee here. Thou wert the first at fault, to come thus far."

" I know. I am not one of those who blame others for their mistakes."

Ahmed smiled: " Thou art not sorry, I can see. And, if what I guess is truth, I envy thee."

Shortly before noon of the next day, Lartal, again headed around the bend into the Pass, saw opening before his eyes the dark cleft. The camels, sure-footed as mules, struggled upward between the rock walls with heaving haunches.

Ahmed turned in the saddle, pointing at the ground:

" Here was the little lieutenant's camel shot down; against that rock was he propped by his man." Ahmed lifted his hand to indicate the crest of the cliff: " Thou seest that he could not fight long. Men with rifles, I among them, were posted everywhere. From now on thou wilt march where no stranger has passed in many, many years."

When a boy, Lartal had explored caverns in Eastern France. He had descended into grottoes where the drippings of centuries had formed columns of sparkling white mineral, but he had never beheld a more tormented, awe-inspiring labour of nature. At one time, a torrent had undoubtedly tumbled down, dug its path to the flat land below, cutting through the softest streak of soil. At times, the lips of the Pass appeared to join, and the caravan proceeded through a fashion of tunnel.

Before long, the first challenge of the sentry echoed. Ahmed answered. The rifleman was

posted high on a crumbling ledge. In case of danger he could take shelter behind an enormous boulder. Below this boulder, a loophole had been pierced, showing only a hole of small diameter, almost invisible.

The captain noticed with surprise that this loophole had been reinforced with concrete, that a niche had been dug into the rock, holding many packages of cartridges. The sentry, seated high above, bare legs swinging in space, held a repeating rifle across his knees. He was stocky, broad shouldered, evidently of a different race from Ahmed and his men. His bare head was shaved clean save for a single tuft of hair.

After the first challenge, he exchanged no greetings with the Arabs, but addressed compliments to the blacks, in dialect. Ahmed looked at Lartal, and winked :

" A man of the rocks. Ignorant of all things—save of how to shoot straight."

More sentries were encountered as they proceeded, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups of three or six. Always well armed, well protected, several of the emplacements so bolstered with cement that they were in reality miniature forts. To attain certain of these gun positions, perched high as the nests of eagles, a system of pulleys had been rigged against the flank of the Pass. An entire division would have been helpless against this hive of fighting men. Lartal counted the men as he passed. He had reached thirty-seven before the party halted for a rest in a widening of the Pass where the direction of the road changed.

" They are supplied with food and water, these sentries ? "

" For six days. But they are replaced every two

days—else their legs and arms would stiffen—it is cold here——"

"How often comes each man's turn of guard?"

"Should I tell thee thou wouldst know how many warriors those here have at their service."

"Such was my idea——"

"It can do no harm—for not all the men come to guard the Pass. The turn of duty comes once every month for each man."

"From five to six hundred men at the Pass alone, then?"

"Yes, Captain. There is a big camp not far from the upper entrance."

"And negroes, such as those around me, how many are there?"

"Few. Three scores or less. We seldom see them here, save when she comes."

"Comes from where, Ahmed?"

"From elsewhere, Captain."

The Pass had widened, the walls were less rugged, sometimes scarcely more than a steep slope, which an agile man could have climbed without difficulty. The sun beat down to the very path. Instead of occupying high perches, the guards were camped in groups of ten or twelve, each group possessing an enormous tom-tom, a cylinder of ornamented wood closed tight at each end with taut skin.

"Signal drums, Ahmed?"

"Yes. The sentries below have smaller drums."

Ahmed dismounted, lifted a heavily padded rod, and brought it down on one of the tom-toms. A dull roar echoed, answered immediately by others drifting up from below. For several minutes the replies boomed, growing fainter and fainter. "Thou hast heard? All are on watch. The man in charge here listens for the number of answers——"

"Within a few seconds of our appearance below, we were signalled up here."

"Up here, and much farther, too, Captain," Ahmed lifted his hand: "The main post is asking why the drums were struck. Listen."

A dim booming drifted from above, increased in strength. The chief of the nearby group picked up the padded stick, beat skilfully upon the tom-tom. As the message was relayed, the entire cliff seemed alive, roaring.

Truly, in the stillness of the night, the rumbling of the many tom-toms would echo in the ears of the startled adventurer like the mirth of giants.

The chief of the group addressed Ahmed volubly. Lartal caught only the word *tobol*, repeated over and over.

"He asks me to explain that it was without his permission I struck the drum. The chief gave orders that the *tobol* must never be struck save in emergencies. But I shall speak thus: 'It was best that the Frenchman know that we watch carefully.'" Ahmed smiled: "Fear not, nothing will be done to punish me. I have need of the mountain people to live, but they also need me."

"Thou art not one of the Mountain People, then?"

"Am I sheep or goat to live in rock? Let us go on."

Forty-five minutes later, the party reached a narrow valley, where many tents were erected. Armed men wandered about, sat near small fires.

"This is where we live," Ahmed announced. "Not in these small tents, but in those beyond——"

He pointed to a group of oblong tents of black leather, separated from the others, typical nomads' tents. Along the lower slope of the hill to the east, camels were grazing.

"That hill is the wall of the cliff that is beheld from below. There is water here at all times of the year, and here are bred our camels. Beyond this vale, there are others, even more fertile. Truly, all the tribes from below might hide here." Before the black tents, Ahmed called near several lads of various ages, from four to fifteen: "My sons—" Ahmed dismounted. "It is forbidden me to offer thee even for one night the shelter of my tent. Here comes the man to whom thou shalt look for further news."

A white-bearded man, white clad, turbaned, approached followed by four bare-legged warriors. He touched Lartal's palm with his own.

"He understands Arabic," Ahmed said.

"I do, Captain. I have orders to send thee on without delay."

"I'm ready." He took leave of Ahmed and followed the new guide.

Horses were led forward, small beautiful animals, as fine in their way as the camels.

The old man pointed to Tlemsani.

"He goes with thee?"

"Yes."

"That is well. But perhaps he will not be allowed to come back."

"Never mind, Wise Beard," Tlemsani replied from the saddle, "—whether allowed or not, that depends on me alone."

"And on Allah," the old fellow admitted with a smile. "Go, Captain, the blacks will guide thee."

The big negro took the lead, set a rapid gait. Soon, the first valley was left behind, the next, where Lartal distinguished a grove of trees, where probably grew the oranges given to Brangin.

A sentry halted the group, shouted a question.

"*Nis imedder 'raye Tamdit,*" answered the black. This time Lartal understood: "I am going to the city." Gradually, the sound of the new dialect, analagous to the Kayblian, was becoming familiar.

"The city—" he murmured. "The city? After all, why not?"

Messaoud set a pace alternating between an easy trot and an occasional spurt ahead at a swifter gait. They rode well, these negroes. It was obvious that they had been trained by an European. They seldom employed the sharp edges of their stirrups and were easier on the horses' mouths than were the Arabs.

The green valleys which had been found immediately at the crest of the Pass, with grazing herds of camels and flocks of long-legged, hairy Saharan sheep soon gave place to a plateau as arid and glistening as the desert spread below. In the extreme distance, the higher peaks of the Lower Atlas receded into endless space.

A group of tents, a dozen armed men: another station in the telegraph of drums connecting the unseen city with its far-flung guard. The next post was encountered toward four in the afternoon where the nature of the soil had once more changed. The small party of horsemen rode through a range of low swells, piled in spots with deep drifts of golden sand, the hollows between sparsely tufted with meagre shrubs and yellowish, coarse grass.

"Much farther, Messaoud?"

"No, Captain."

Lartal peered ahead with eagerness, but saw nothing save the outline of the next swells. The city, therefore, could not be a very impressive aggregation of buildings. No minaret, no dome, pierced above the low hills.

A narrow vale, a plain five or six hundred yards in width, and still another lift of ground, cut sheer across the plateau from north to south. A space opened within this natural wall, between two graceful, rounded knolls. Lartal was startled by the sudden hollow rumbling made by horses' hoofs on planking.

The thumps of iron plates on a wooden bridge, a familiar sound in France, crackled in his brain with the force of an explosion. He glanced about. They were indeed crossing a bridge, suspended by great chains of wrought iron across a chasm twenty-five or thirty feet wide. At the bottom of this moat he could see rows of sharpened stakes, pointing at an angle. An attacking force would find this ditch a formidable obstacle, so far from materials with which to build an emergency bridge, for the planking on which Lartal now halted, upon a signal from the black, could be lowered against the far flank.

On the other side of the giant trench was a solid blockhouse of rough-hewn stones, occupied by a dozen riflemen, the same type of broad-shouldered, bearded, primitive warriors, seen in the Pass.

They were commanded by a youth of twenty-one or two, dressed in a green and white cloak, hands resting with studied ease on the hilts of two knives passed through the sash. This important chieftain came forward majestically, stared insolently into the captain's face. He conversed a few seconds with the blacks, then gestured his consent to their passage.

Lartal was stirred to sympathy rather than resentment. This type of newly promoted officer was universal, and the little exhibition of authority should be forgiven him. He turned in the saddle to look back, and then for the first time saw that a redoubt occupied the top of the hills, a well-estab-

lished, solid fortified line, broken by redans, bastioned according to the rules of the art. Somewhat old fashioned, but very effective, these fortifications in a land where there was no possibility of artillery attack.

There were quarters for riflemen, low oblong buildings of sun-dried bricks and mortar, with terraced roofs. And here again were herds of camels and flocks of sheep. At intervals rose the tall counterweight perches that indicated the location of wells.

Tlemsani voiced his surprise excitedly. He had seen the fortifications of the principal desert aggregations, the *Ksars* of a half-hundred oases. Never, either in Araouan or at Taoudeni, had he seen the like, he declared. He detailed the advantages of the position, the cleverly contrived traps for advancing troops.

"Those behind with their bellies full of meat—those before tired by a long trip. Truly, it would not be in doubt who would win."

They passed villages. Women and children began to appear. The strange headgear on the European, the colonial helmet, brought small boys racing from all quarters. Healthy, tanned children, brilliant teeth in grimy faces, shrill, excited voices. Their curiosity showed they had not been taught to hate the French uniform. He answered their greetings in Arabic, which a few understood and repeated.

"No blacks among them, Messaoud."

"No, our little ones are down below."

"In the city?"

"No," Messaoud grinned, "farther down."

"Farther down—where?"

"In the gardens. Thou'lt see."

It was not long before Tlemsani attracted his chief's attention.

"Cattle, cattle!"

Guarded by lanky, half-naked lads, a herd of cattle grazed not far away. Lartal's maternal grandfather had been a landowner, and the indices of Renoult-Lizot and Dechambre were familiar to him. But he did not dismount to ascertain whether they were or were not good for milk and butter. He did note, however, that like all things in this strange land, they were not of a distinct breed. It appeared to him that the cross between the brown Guelba breed of the Atlas and the Italian species had been achieved with better result than attained by government experts in Algeria and Tunis.

His sense of wonder had become blunted. Since morning he had crossed, hundreds of miles in the Sahara, fertile lands stocked with fine animals, peopled by an alert, clear-eyed population, defended by a well-organised army. Everything revealed system, a controlling mind of unusual scope, the presence of man not held back by the thousand and one prejudices of Islam, an organiser, a warrior, an agriculturist.

Messaoud reined his horse at the top of a hill, waited for Lartal to reach his side, then gestured with an open hand before them.

A gentle slope floated down into gathering violet mist, through which Lartal could distinguish, far below, an immense oasis.

Nearer, the ruddy sunset glowed on white walls, a profusion of low buildings, many sparkling with ornamental blue-and-green tiling, a huddle of dwellings descending in an endless spread of terraces, of red roofs like splotches of blood on the surrounding whiteness. A giant shaft of red dominated the whole, a square tower ending in a needle-like minaret overlaid with glittering tiles, a tower nearly as high as the

Kutubia of Marrakesh, famed throughout Islam. Here and there swelled the dome of a *marabout*, jutting above the leafy crests of palms. In the spacious streets, on the terraces, in the open squares, moved hundreds of blue and white clad figures.

And, as if Lartal's arrival had been prearranged, a signal long expected, the animation was suspended.

A faint call rose :

" God is most great ! "

Piously, using the privilege of the traveller to pray where the call finds him, the negroes dismounted, and Tlemsani imitated them. The captain was left alone, high in the saddle, contemplating the new city, the mountains beyond.

For the moment he forgot the impulse that had led him here, felt strangely at one with those beside him, with those in the streets and on the terraces. He had come far to find the work of man protected by the work of Allah. Half ashamed of his own emotion, he lifted his right hand in greeting.

Then he lighted a cigarette and waited for the prayer to end.

" What is the name of the city ? " he asked of the black.

" It is but that, Captain : *Tamdit*, the city. There is but one."

Then he led the way down the slope, waving his carbine high over his head. The streets through which they passed were unpaved. Water trickled in the shallow sewer ditches on either side. The odours that assail sensitive European nostrils in the ordinary native towns were not prevalent.

A few riders passed them. Pedestrians ran out of the path, huddled against the whitewashed walls of the houses. The blacks, evidently policemen from their behaviour, appeared to relish the sudden darts

for safety made by the citizens. They were greeted with loud curses and followed by threatening gestures.

At last, after turning many corners at top speed, they came to a halt before a gate guarded by a man as tall, as black, as gaudily clad as themselves. This sentry presented his bayonet with the precision of motion to be envied by a trained *tirailleur* of France, and in spite of the banter of the returning blacks, insisted that they wait until he called the guard.

The captain, feeling that he had at last arrived at his destination, shifted in the saddle as upon a red-hot plate. The negro commander of the guards suggested that he dismount before entering the yard, but he refused and rode through the portals, across a sanded esplanade, dismounting before a rather imposing white structure surrounded by the square masonry pillars of a wide verandah.

He threw the reins to Tlemsani, who had insisted on following him, and entered the first room, an unfurnished hall.

When he found the place empty, he shouted: "Hello! Is French spoken here?"

A negro appeared, and although he resembled the others like a brother, Lartal recognised him as the man captured by Tlemsani at the cliff.

"Patience, Captain," he said, in French. "I am to lead thee."

"Thou dost speak French, then. Why didst thou not speak formerly?"

"I replied in Arabic, as I was questioned."

Lartal followed him through the hall, into another hall, longer, dimmer, cooler than the first.

"Where art thou taking me, Snow-ball?"

"To my master——"

"And thy mistress, where is she?"

"Thou'lt see her, Captain."

"No one was ruined furnishing this place," Lartal thought, as he climbed a narrow flight of stairs, stark, uncarpeted. "Who is thy master?" he asked of the black.

"Si Khalil——"

"Si Khalil," Lartal repeated. "I'm far advanced! Lord Charles, in a word! How simple. What prodigious light it throws upon all this!"

On the floor above, in a long gallery lighted by many windows, his boots sunk deep in a thick carpet. Many doors appeared in the walls of the gallery, heavy, iron-bound wooden panels, studded with nails, showing forged metal locks of impressive size and strength.

"What is this? The Government Palace, the Hotel de Ville, the prison——"

"All three, Captain." The negro halted before one of the doors, opened it with a large key: "Enter——"

Then the door clanged shut, the key rattled in the lock.

Lartal whistled gently, controlling a desire to kick upon the panels.

In the remnant of daylight sliding from a window high in the wall, he perceived a prettily figured carpet under his feet, a few immense leather pillows scattered near the walls, a fashion of divan occupying a far corner, and fastened in brackets on the walls, two oil lamps of bronze. He struck a match, lighted the wicks.

"Poor service," he said aloud.

He wandered about the room, lifted various hangings, seeking another door. After several minutes of useless search, he gave up, tossed his helmet on one of the pillows, removed his boots and

sprawled upon the divan : " No use standing there gaping—who knows how long I'll have to wait ? " He shifted his weight about. " Softer than the sand, at any rate."

Where his waking thoughts ended and his dreams started, he never knew. But he was awakened by the rattle of the key in the lock. He passed his fingers through his hair, and sat up yawning.

" Come in, come in," he invited cordially.

The door swung open, and a tall old man entered. He was dressed simply, in a white *gandoura*. Despite his beard and the Arab costume, the round bald head was undeniably that of a Frenchman.

" I'm sorry you were locked in, Captain Lartal," he offered. " I did not arrive until a few minutes ago from below, and found there had been a misunderstanding. The blacks say you would not wait —and they thought it best to keep you quiet until I came."

" Little harm done," Lartal bowed with burlesque ceremony. " You already know me. Whom have I the honour of addressing ? "

" Charles Cassabot, formerly Lieutenant of *Spahis*."

" And now, I presume, military adviser to the Kaid, Sultan, or whatever title is borne by the leader of these people."

" This might be called a republic, Captain. With all due modesty I am forced to state that I acknowledge superiority to no one here."

" You are Si Khalil ? "

" I am."

" Accept my compliments——"

Si Khalil bowed.

" Charles Cabassot," Lartal repeated. " Your name is vaguely familiar."

"Probably."

"And I take it that you have summoned me to assist you in rehabilitating yourself."

Cabassot smiled placidly:

"You are mistaken, you are called for something far more important. From your behaviour I had believed you less excitable, less prompt to scorn——"

Lartal shrugged:

"You may have had good reason for—exiling yourself. Until I know your reasons, you will understand, I cannot commit myself to a judgment of your conduct."

"I had a very good reason, Captain. In fact the best of reasons."

"Which was?"

"Murder."

"Oh," Lartal said. "That was a good reason."

CHAPTER IX

SI KHALIL smiled blandly.

"You understand?"

"Perfectly. One thing, however, puzzles me. You have just stated that you have no wish to make your peace with the French authorities. Your note—I gather you wrote the message brought to me at Tabelkala—mentioned that my acceptance would be of service to my Motherland."

"Which motive alone," Si Khalil wondered, "brought you here?"

"It influenced me, yes."

"The service you will render France, while not direct, or—" Si Khalil smiled with annoying persistence—"in the least unpleasant, will be best considered in later days."

"Frankly, Monsieur, I am deeply impressed by what I have seen to-day. You have accomplished much. You and your people could help France considerably, in many ways. No doubt, unless your crime was particularly heinous, some arrangement could be arrived at, a discreet pact. Naturally, as I came to you without preparations, anything I may propose will have to be ratified by the proper authorities."

"I care very little, Captain Lartal, about the authorities you mention." Si Khalil waved a deprecating hand: "I speak with all due respect, you understand. My dealings with you will be man to man, rather than between a seeker of pardon and a captain in the armies of the Republic——"

"Proceed."

" In due time. You have not yet eaten. At the risk of seeming inhospitable," Si Khalil added, " I do not invite you to share my meal. First, I must make clear to you exactly what occurred in the past. It would sadden me greatly should you regret in the future having broken bread, eaten salt, with a man unworthy of honour."

" Bah—I am in no mood to question the origin of roasted lamb, of a Chateaubriand, of anything, in a word, that can be eaten——"

Si Khalil shook his head.

" We'll meet later, Captain."

He left.

Lartal was not extremely perturbed by the sudden revelation that his host was, or had been, a murderer. A man did not cut himself off from his race, abandon his standing in the army, for a light cause. And Si Khalil did not appear to be a man of sanguinary instinct. Lartal rather liked him.

" Charles Cabassot—Cabassot—a bizarre name. I have heard it, or seen it, before. Let's try to identify him by a process of elimination."

One by one, he recalled various stories that floated among the endless talk around the mess tables. Love affairs, shootings, the dead and forgotten annals of forty years of gossip in North Africa filed in rapid succession. Uselessly, for the name was hidden in some far corner of his memory ; no thread appeared to lead to it. The titles of the principals in a half hundred scandals emerged, and Cabassot did not strike a ringing note.

" He'll tell me soon enough. In the meanwhile—" he struck the wall with his knuckles : " Someone, please——"

The door opened immediately, and the black appeared.

"By the way, as it seems we will see each other a while longer, Snow-ball, what is thy name?"

"Kumbaba, Captain."

"Pleasing to the ear, easy to remember. My compliments to thee, Kumbaba. When am I to eat?"

"I await thy orders, Captain."

"My orders—" Lartal paused reflectively. "First, I'd like to wash. Not a little, but altogether. Can that be accomplished, Kumbaba?"

"It can, Captain."

"After that, I'd like to have new garments. Can such be found?"

"Thy baggage is here, Captain. The chief at the Pass sent it after thy departure."

"Fine. Thou'lt find me a full uniform, white. Also, the red waistcoat with the bright buttons. After that, food. Preferably beef."

"Is that all, Captain?"

"Well—" Lartal went on jokingly, "if a bottle of cognac, Chartreuse, or any spirituous liquor usually served after coffee is to be had, bring it, too. A cigar, perhaps?"

Kumbaba grinned amiably.

"The bath cannot be brought here. Follow me, Captain."

Lartal followed him, through the hall lighted now by many lamps, down the stairs, across the yard. Kumbaba evidently did not stoop to menial service. A clap of the hands brought several husky blacks. In the little cell, a large wooden tub was filled with hot water. He was massaged, rubbed, dried. Then he slipped into the cool whites, refreshed, fragrant as a recently cut rose.

His bare feet at ease in sandals, he followed Kumbaba back to the building, entered another

room, tiled to the height of six feet with bright blue patterns on white. Several dishes were laid on a knee high table.

The beef was superior in quality to the tough meat served at Tabelkala, prepared with a minty sauce that teased the appetite. Lartal had seldom tasted better coffee. Kumbaba supervised the service, giving a hint now and then to the silent blacks. To conclude, he brought a squat, green bottle with a red seal, and set a glass beside it.

"Mohammed's teachings are not strictly followed here," Lartal mused.

Kumbaba offered him a box of cigars. Lartal selected one. The West Indies had been its birthplace. Plainly, the People of the Cliff had connections with the outside world.

"Thou hast given me everything I asked for, Kumbaba. Tell me, who smokes these cigars?"

"Si Khalil."

"And who drinks this forbidden stuff?"

"Si Khalil."

"And who brings them here for him, Kumbaba?"

"Ahmed, or any other of the Arabs who lead the caravans north and back."

Lartal fumbled in his pockets, located what he sought.

"Dost thou know this, Kumbaba?"

"Yes. A *douro*, a five-franc piece."

"Couldst thou use it?"

"Yes, Captain."

The black's acceptance of the silver proved conclusively that direct contact with the rest of the universe existed. Unless, however, the silver value alone counted, for the manufacture of jewellery.

Lartal washed his hands in the perfumed water presented to him and stood up.

"I feel better, Kumbaba! What is to be done with me now?"

"I was told to take thee to Si Khalil after the meal, Captain."

"Lead on, Kumbaba, lead on!"

They passed through a labyrinth of halls and spacious rooms, the tallow candles, held aloft by the negro, throwing strange shadows on the walls, increasing Lartal's sense of solitude. For the first time, in that cheerless semi-darkness, he felt far from Tabelkala, farther than he had ever felt in the open desert. And to a man used to command even this tolerable captivity was annoying.

Suddenly, the open sky spread above him, clear, starry. Above the opposite wall loomed the shadowy silhouette of the great square tower. The tinkling of water jets dropping back into pools in a fine, dewy rain, reached him. He was in the central patio, the yard, the lung of any self-respecting North African home.

"Si Khalil is waiting for thee here," Kumbaba announced.

Left alone, Lartal paced the sanded aisles, wandered under the canopy of branches, halted by the rim of the nearest pool. The stars trembled on the limpid surface, with long, darting arrows of gold. Immediately across from him, a greater star, red and pulsating, seemed to glow. Probably, the tip of Si Khalil's cigar. Slowly, Lartal circled the stone rim of the basin.

"Beautiful night," Si Khalil volunteered.

Lartal sat beside him: "Beautiful night, yes."

"Were you given everything you needed?"

"Yes, thank you. Rather more than I expected."

"Oh—we're not altogether savages."

"You have an immense place here, Si Khalil."

"It naturally seems larger at night, as all unfamiliar houses do to a newcomer. My real home is down below. Nevertheless two of my wives live here practically the entire year."

"Two? I beg your pardon, I had forgotten you were a Mohammedan." Lartal laughed. "I understand why a return to France does not enter your mind."

"At my age, Captain," Si Khalil said, good-humoredly, "that is more or less a concession to the custom of the land. The people do not comprehend celibacy."

An unpleasant possibility entered the Captain's mind. Who was to say that both he and Brangin had not taken the girl's relationship with this man for granted.

Lartal resumed:

"You have children, of course."

"Two. I once had grown sons, but both left—I'll explain later. There is the daughter of my first wife, and a son, fifteen years old. You'll see them both before long."

"I believe I already have had the honour of meeting your daughter——"

"Fortunately for me, yes."

"It seems to me that the luck was mine."

"Not altogether. You see I need a Frenchman. And I strongly doubt that the young man who broke his leg in the Pass a few months gone, would have done as well as you."

"Lieutenant Brangin? Why not?"

"Too much surface impetuosity. In reality, a very stern, solid character. He would have weighed everything carefully and would not have come. His kind flame with the flare of a straw torch, brightly, but not for long."

"And I filled the need better?"

"You were not unknown to me by reputation, Captain Lartal. I keep informed as to the changes occurring in the French Posts nearest me. For instance, Tabelkala is commanded by Captain Vasil, your second in the *Mehariste* group was Sergeant Perez. Igli is commanded by Major Labroc—the lieutenants—" Si Khalil listed the names without a mistake. "Before coming here, you were in the Sudanese forces. You have always received good notes, are reputed to be a level-headed, conscientious officer of more than ordinary ability."

"Which, absurdly enough, made you certain that I would immediately act upon your message?"

"Which," Si Khalil corrected, "made me suspect that in you lurked the possibility for swift, independent decision. To tell you the truth, I estimated that you would recall the meeting with my daughter without too great displeasure, and that if properly coated with the sugar of duty, you'd swallow the pill——"

"It would be ridiculous for me to deny the truth at this time," Lartal admitted. "I will not try to conceal from you that I was very much intrigued—desirous to find out exactly to what people my captive belonged."

"An interest solely based on ethnology, Captain?"

"You may force me to speak offensively."

"Not at all. On the contrary, the urge that brought you here seems to me the most natural of all urges. And I thank Allah that the man was strong enough to defeat the officer, Captain."

"And now that I am here, what do you want of me?"

"Nothing, save to fulfil your desires, Captain."

"I am afraid I do not understand."

"You wish to see my daughter again. You shall see her. You do not think that I summoned you from Tabelkala to supply myself with a partner at *piquet*, do you?"

"Difficult to tell, Si Khalil. You appear to be remarkably self-sufficient in everything else."

"What part of France are you from?"

"The east."

"As myself. Thirty or thirty-five years apart, we are much alike in background, I suppose. Small town, boarding school, Military Academy. Therefore, you will understand me better than the average. In fact, you in my boots, I in yours, we would act remarkably alike. Before you thank me for the doubtful compliment, wait for the rest of my story."

"Which, at any rate, must be rather extraordinary."

"Far from it, when considered in its various stages of progress. Nothing else could have happened. I don't refer to this place, this gathering of freemen, which is the result of a miracle. Sidi Moussa, who led us here, was a saint. But so far as my own life is concerned, it forms the tritest, oldest yarn ever told. A three-cornered affair, a woman, two men. Given youth, the habit of wielding weapons, the background of Southern Algeria, it was natural that the affair should be simplified by the simplest, quickest method. I survived, and took the woman. Which was as it was to be, as Allah willed."

Si Khalil tossed the stump of his cigar into the basin. The burning end sizzled briefly.

"And," Lartal said dryly, "in knocking off the superfluous corner, you incurred the wrath of a Government which does not take into consideration

an Algerian background and the desire felt by a Frenchman for a native woman."

"Precisely. Even as it will not comprehend, Captain Lartal, your interest in another native woman."

"In all this, I have learned nothing about my intended rôle. It would be best, in the interest of all concerned, to come to a decision swiftly. In case we do not agree as to just where the limit exists between our varying ideals, I presume that you will allow me to return."

"In case you do not agree, Captain, I shall but ask you to give me your word of honour not to reveal what you have seen, and you will be free. Yet I believe we can come to an understanding."

"We are alone, in beautiful surroundings, with the song of the nightingales in our ears," Lartal said. "No better setting could be imagined for an attentive hearing on my part."

Si Khalil lighted another cigar.

"Yes, it is so, Captain——"

CHAPTER X

"I AM now nearly seventy. I arrived in Africa at twenty-one. My notes as an officer—were never very good. I was reputed stubborn, little amenable to discipline. It was generally acknowledged, though, that native soldiers would follow me anywhere.

"The Post of El Makbara was not an unpleasant site, a stocky little fort erected to flank the path that branched from the Algiers-Ouargla route. Thirty minutes' ride away was a stream, cutting through a rocky stretch, shaded by rose-laurel bushes.

"One afternoon I had gone toward the river, as on a hundred afternoons before. Usually, the sound of my horse's hoofs striking stone would send the women, come there for water from nearby villages, scurrying away. I cannot honestly recall whether I purposely took to the sand along the stream or whether my horse selected this softer soil of his own will, but I approached silently. I saw her filling jars, which she placed side by side on the bank.

"I had seen many beautiful native women in nine years spent in Algeria. But never such as she. She wore but a single garment, striped blue and white, her arms and legs, bronzed by the sun, were bare. I halted, watched her for a long while without speaking.

"She at last turned to look at me. The first sight of her face was like a fist blow between the eyes. Her beauty struck me violently. Dark eyes, fearless, steady, the dazzling line of teeth between full coral lips. As she stood straight, her firm little breasts lifted the cloth.

" ' I did not hear thee, Christian,' she said.

" I was more than a little angry at myself for my emotion. It was not at all flattering to feel such an impression from a native girl, a sort of vague, respectful awe, mingled with too great admiration.

" ' Yet my horse made sufficient noise. Where are those who should watch thee ? '

" She laughed.

" ' Gone farther, to wade in the river.'

" In fact, I was then aware of women's voices downstream.

" ' Who is thy father ? '

" ' I am Khadijah, daughter of Sidi Moussa.'

" ' How long hast thou been here, near the French ? '

" ' Several months. I know thee. Thou art the lieutenant who commands all.'

" I dismounted, stood across the stream from her. It was not in my nature to hesitate long. Seeing that the stream could be forded on protruding rocks, I took the first step. But I saw she would run off before I could reach her. I was forced to carry on the conversation at a distance.

" ' Do the women often leave thee alone ? '

" ' Each in turn fills the jugs while the others wade.'

" ' Is it very amusing to wade ? '

" ' It is forbidden us.'

" ' When wilt thou again be left alone, Khadijah?'

" ' In six days.'

" ' Too long. Give up thy turn. For, thou seest, it is even more forbidden to speak to a Christian than to wade, therefore much more amusing.'

" ' It isn't ! But I shall be alone again in two days.'

"'I shall come alone, too, and ride my horse on the sand.'

"'Oh,' she said, laughing: 'I did not hear thee, but I saw thee back yonder.'

"'Next time, I may come across to thy side, Khadijah?'

"'Yes, if my brother is not near. He comes with us, goes back with us. He has a rifle to protect us if we are attacked.'

"'Where is he now?'

"'He said there was no danger, went hunting alone.'

"'He is a good brother, then. I'll talk with thee until the other women return. Then I'll count the hours until day after to-morrow.'

"'Why?'

"'To see thy eyes like stars, and thy teeth like hailstones.'

"'No. To pull thy moustache like a rope and wet thy boots in the river again.'

"I cut a ridiculous figure, standing ankle deep in running water, tormenting my whiskers. I retreated to firm land. Although her mocking tone enraged me, I could not summon the dignity to leave. For thirty minutes we exchanged much the same sort of scintillating conversation. The cries of the women coming back forced me to go, after begging her to promise again to see me in two days."

"'Who is Sidi Moussa?' I asked my sergeant at the fort.

"'A rattle-brained old fool. Deems himself some sort of a prophet. It's to listen to him natives are flocking around here. Did you see his daughter, Lieutenant?'

"'Yes,' I admitted with some annoyance. Already, I disliked the thought that another man

might have flirted with her, 'Did you see her, Sergeant?'

"'No. I'd like to. The men claim she is as beautiful as the full moon.'

"'They'd better put in some time furbishing their carbines. If they wish to study astronomy, let them choose some other spot save the river bank. Nine times out of ten, trouble starts over interference with native women.'

"'Understood, Lieutenant. Except on wash-day, the river's out of bounds for the privates—and noncoms.'

"I decided to occupy the hours of waiting with an investigation of Sidi Moussa. From a private search, it was turned into an official request by an order received asking me to ascertain the identity of Sidi Moussa, reputed to be gathering around him large numbers of natives, establishing himself as a preacher. Enclosed was a brief biography of Moussa, supplied by the Arab Bureaux.

"Scarcely twenty when the French landed in Algeria, he had already made the pilgrimage to Mecca, enjoyed a reputation for piety nearly equal to that of Abd el Kader. At the battle of Mactah, won by the great Emir over our troops, Moussa had led the fifteen hundred horsemen thrown on the flank of the defeated army. At the siege of Tlemsen, he had been among the attackers, one of the last to give up the struggle. Throughout the long struggle of Abd el Kader against the conquerors, he had distinguished himself by his hatred of Christians, his unbending belief in resistance. Gifted with a keen mind as well as a daring spirit, he had been despatched to the Sultan of Morocco to obtain alliance against the Infidel.

"Captured after the tragedy of the Dahra

Grottoes, he had been kept a prisoner in France, until permitted to go back to Algeria upon promise of good behaviour. Yet he had persistently refused to swing to our side, to preach submission. Living in Kabylia at the time of the Franco-Prussian War, it could not be said that he had participated in the fomenting of revolt. When it was proved to the Kabylians that, although unable to beat the armies of Germany, it was still possible for the French to make themselves respected in Africa, he had gathered the broken remnants of several tribes, led them into the south. Inquiry into his present activities was needed, as the people near him showed a spirit of independence detrimental to the general attitude toward France. Many had been overheard by our spies stating that soon the Infidel would no longer impose taxes and formalities.

"I sent Sidi Moussa an invitation to come to El Makbara. He arrived with one follower, his young son, Yusuf. It was hard to dislike the boy, seventeen at most, handsome, straight as a lance, proud of glance. Sidi Moussa was a beautiful man, there is no other term to describe him. Not very tall, not impressive, yet smooth in gesture, sublime in poise. His brown eyes were soft as those of a woman, his smile that of an apostle. The wide pupils, which had reflected so many scenes of carnage in former days, filled me with veneration, so that I quite forgot the rôle I had intended to play. With an ease of manner astonishing, until one recalled his long sojourn in France, he discussed contemporary politics on the Continent and in England. He had learned our language—not merely the words, but the spirit. He accepted a cigar and a cup of coffee, gave me the impression that he was interviewing me. He guided the conversation with such skill that, before I knew

it, I had revealed several things I should have concealed. He inspired confidence, was a man one instinctively felt could be shown the seamy side of one's life.

"'Lieutenant,' he said after awhile, 'you have proved your valour many times. There is a greater courage you lack as yet, the courage of the spirit. You have summoned me here at the request of your superiors, who wish to learn what I am planning. Yet you hesitate to talk frankly, as a soldier should, to one who in his time was a warrior himself.'

"'True, Sidi Moussa. But I have seen you, recalled that once you gave your parole not to fight France again. That is enough.'

"'An order is an order. I shall state my intentions plainly.'

"'I shall be most grateful, Sidi Moussa.'

"'I fought twelve years for the Faith with the sword. I saw Abd el Kader, who had been born poor, treat on equal terms with the representative of the French King. Faith alone had gathered armies around him, faith alone had brought him to the heights. He made a peace, which did not last long. It was the will of Allah. I was sent afield to guide men in battle for the Faith. You have seen, Lieutenant, the Grottoes of Dahra, in the twin hills rising from the plain of Tenez, connected by a great bridge of stone? In those grottoes we were forced back with our families and our flocks. Trusting Allah would save us, we refused to surrender. Three times did your leader send speakers, three times we slew. Seeing we would not give up, he ordered immense fires lighted at the entrance to the grottoes. For two days, those fires were fed with new faggots, and we inside were stifled by the thick smoke. Many died, men, women, small children.

" ' On the morning of the third day when there were none of us strong enough to fight, the soldiers came in. Six hundred corpses were taken out to be buried. Hundreds more were left inside. Only sixty men survived, of which one-half died during the night. I was one of the survivors. Half-mad, having heard the screams of dying women and the moans of children, the insane shouts of the men, I was taken away. Taken in the field, my head must have fallen, for I was known as your bitter foe. But your soldiers were shocked by what they had seen in the grottoes. They could kill no more. I was spared, sent to France a prisoner. There I beheld your true power, learned the few thousand soldiers you sent against us were but a small part of what might be sent. I then knew that nothing we could do could halt you, for Allah opened my eyes, made His will manifest.

" ' I came back after the fall of Abd el Kader. I had given my word not to speak against you. I lived in Kabylia, in Kabylia thrice devastated by your troops. The olive trees had been murdered by you. And it takes thirty years before the olive trees give fruits. The land was impoverished, many families, once proud, were ruined, Prosperity returned a little more each year. Then you were beaten by the Germans, the Kabylians took heart, fought you, lost, and the work of peace was spoiled. I could not witness it longer. I gathered the ruined, the dissatisfied, promised them a new land and led them away. As I travelled, news of my preachings spread. Those who had been ruined by the will of Allah, families from the villages of Shiffa, El Affrun, Muzaya and the others destroyed by the earthquake, joined us. More than their bellies needed meat, more than their bodies needed garments, their souls

needed faith. And I, who was growing old, who had seen so many die, and others take their place, I had faith.

"'Others joined me. Saharans from the Oases of the Touat, driven north by plundering bands, even a number of low-caste Tuareg, cast up on our shore of the desert like bits of rotten wood by the sea. They did not love one another, yet they were all true believers. I forbade them to quarrel, told them that when perfect understanding reigned among them, then only, would I start toward the land of plenty. This region near El Makbara is fertile, scantily peopled. Our presence here harms no one. We have herds of cattles, horses, camels. We ask only to live in peace. Write thus to your chiefs.'

"'Did you talk thus to them when you were called to Oran?'

"'I talked thus, Lieutenant.'

"'What was said?'

"'They said Arabs were Arabs, ready to talk peace when their hearts burned for war.'

"'Where is the land to which you will lead them?'

Sidi Moussa smiled, puffed at his cigar a moment.

"'Allah knows. I have faith that what I have spoken is truth. I will awake some morning, rise and say: "Follow me." I will walk where I am guided, and we shall find it.'

"'That rather lacks in geographical precision—' I observed.

"'When a child takes his first steps, he hesitates, knows not what is around the corner of his house. As he grows older, he turns that corner and many other corners. All his life, he finds new things. Not all these things were known of other men. The land exists.'

"Sidi Moussa, I felt, had spoken in good faith.

There was no purpose in further questioning. I have never found out whether he knew his ultimate destination then. I rather believe he did not, that he was led around the corner, like a child, when the time came.

" He came back the following day and we smoked together. He had a keen, sly wit, enjoyed conversation in French, and, despite his austere character of seer, was not over-strict in his observance of minor religious rules. Sidi Moussa was the least bigoted of all religious men I have ever met. He spoke with great respect of an old priest who had tried for years to convert him to Christianity. He knew the Koran by heart, had a verse in answer for everything. Islam is a beautiful religion, if one understands it. Sidi Moussa made me understand.

" Like the majority of young officers of my days, I held the dreamer in little esteem, until I encountered Sidi Moussa. At first I fought the growing belief that the old man represented a force I did not understand. I clung to his small hypocrisies, his enjoyment of the good things of life, his carnal ideal of women to discount his worth. Yet, when my spirit was troubled, I went to see him, to leave him refreshed. He trimmed life of its non-essentials, refused to see anything of a man save the stark soul of him to judge whether that man was good or evil. Before long, I regarded him with an even warmer affection, almost as a father. Never, until I was compelled by the accomplished fact, did I dare reveal to him my love for his daughter. What he would have said, I cannot guess, but I rather believe he knew all along.

" I surrendered without a struggle, saw Khadijah often. My love for the daughter blinded me to the

acts of the father. Day after day, new tents would rise. From the north and east appeared long caravans, camels bearing women and merchandise, flocks guarded by gaudily dressed horsemen and gaunt, fierce herders on foot. I should have reported their presence, asked for reinforcements. But reinforcements would have meant new officers, perhaps a superior, inevitable curtailing of my daily trips. I answered pressing queries with the invariable answer: 'Able to handle situation. Nothing alarming.'

"Khadijah's companions were not long in discovering why she preferred to be left alone. Despite the reputed disloyalty of their sex, no word was whispered. I found out, before long, the reason for their silence. The hours devoted to the bringing of water to the tents were used for secret meetings. Before long, I was composing songs in Arabic and Berber. Khadijah was educated in a subtle, indefinable fashion, beyond schools and books. Yet I know now she spoke only those sayings which are true in all races.

"When a man stands at the stern of a vessel leaving port, he has the impression that the land is sliding away from him rather than that he is departing. Thus did my former life slide from me. I saw it diminishing with startled eyes, could not make a move to stop. It was inevitable that some day she would leave or I would be transferred. I whipped myself with this thought, tried to see in her only a woman who would accept my successor at the post. Times there were when I looked at her and wished to kill her, because I knew she could not always be mine.

"'Thy eyes are beautiful as stars. Thy skin is white as a moonbeam, Khadijah——'

" ' Dost thou ever look at the moon and the stars and think of me ? '

" ' Every night, since I first saw thee.'

" ' Never before hast thou looked and thought of another woman ? '

" ' Not as I think of thee.'

" ' Not even of a Christian woman ? '

" ' Never.'

" She nestled against me. Across the river my horse looked at us with startled, globular eyes. His ears moved, as if he were listening with stolid irony.

" ' I would like to see thee in the moonlight, Khadijah, I wish to know thee as thou art at all times. In the morning, at noon, at night.'

" ' It cannot be. At night, there are sentries.'

" ' I'll come near the tents——'

" ' To be killed. Then I would see thee no more, in sunshine or moonlight.' She hesitated : ' I have a friend who lives in a great tent far from others. I am permitted to go to see her sometimes. To-night, I'll ask, and come here instead.'

" ' I am to wait here ? '

" ' Yes. Do not wait too long, however. Permission may be refused me to-night, when I want it, of all nights.'

"She had already learned that fate often interferes. As for me, I was so overjoyed at her consent I could not see danger or failure. Two hours after sundown, I told my sergeant I would go out, and not return until late. I went afoot, as hoofs striking the ground would have heralded my approach. I arrived at the river before the moon rose. To say it was the most cheerful place in the world would be untrue. Yet, when she arrived, my uneasiness gave place to a surge of pride ; she was brave, had risked much to come to me.

"We stayed in the moonlight, and everything was more beautiful, more intimate. Her confidence banished my fear and we lingered for hours. At last, it was I who sent her away.

"'We will meet again to-morrow night. Go now.'

"My nocturnal expeditions increased in frequency during the next two weeks. I made plans to readjust my life. Sidi Moussa did not feel for us the fierce scorn of others of his race. I trusted he would give me his daughter when I asked him. I would leave the army, take Khadijah to France, marry her according to our laws. She was young, intelligent, and I hoped to transform her, outwardly at least, into a Frenchwoman. True, she was of Arab and Berber blood, but I preferred giving my children Sidi Moussa for a grandfather in preference to many Frenchmen I could name.

"Then, one day, an orderly entered my room, informed me that a detachment of troops was approaching El Makbara. No word had been sent me. I ran out to see for myself, and met, at the front gate, a captain, a short broad-shouldered fellow, whose sweat-varnished face shone like a chestnut.

"'Lieutenant Cabassot?'

"'Yes, Captain.'

"'Bellani, Louis Napoleon,' he introduced himself. Behind him I saw perhaps forty native infantrymen piloted by a white sergeant-major. 'Everything's ready for us?'

"'No, Captain. I was not warned of your coming.'

"The small black eyes beneath the visor of the braided kepi became the centre of many wrinkles.

"'Didn't warn you, eh?'

"'I'll requisition supplies. How long will you stay?'

"'Stay here? Sacred devils—for good!'

"I managed to smile, led him to my quarters, offered him a drink. Judging from the initial dose of absinthe he poured out, he did not fear alcohol.

"'You must think me a pig, Cabassot, to come here and bother you. We won't eat each other's noses off, as they expect. Act as if I were not here, see?'

"'Thank you, Captain.'

"As I spoke, I saw the newcomers filing across the yard, directed by my sergeant. I went to him.

"'How does it happen everything's ready?'

"'I employed the signed blanks you left me, Lieutenant.'

"'Why was I not informed?'

"'The dispatch has been on your table four days, Lieutenant.'

"'How much did you have to do with this?" I asked.

"I did my duty, Lieutenant.'

"'Did you send a request for reinforcements under my name?"

"'I knew you'd hate me for it, Lieutenant, but I had to stop it somehow. She's making a fool out of you.'

"'You've not helped matters.'

"After dinner, I addressed Bellani.

"'May I have permission to leave the Post until midnight, Captain?'

"'Pretty?' Bellani wondered, curling his moustache with one hand, grinning.

"'Very pretty, Captain.'

"'Sure you won't get your throat slit?'

"'Sure, Captain.'

"'Go on, then.'

"'Leave until twelve, Sergeant," I reported as I went out, with a triumphant grin. 'Hang a lantern where I can see it on the way back. Dark night, to-night.'

"Why had the sergeant managed to bring a superior in El Makbara? Jealousy or mistaken friendship? The first, probably, for Khadijah later told me he had tried to converse with her many times. I teased him a bit, reported my departures and returns, duly authorized by the post-commander.

"Bellani was a likeable man, devoid of poise. Son of a Corsican, a non-commissioned officer in the army of the Second Empire, he had been brought up in barracks, had never looked forward to the epaulette. He had served in Crimea, frozen in the trenches before Sebastopol. He had seen Italy and Mexico. His splendid conduct in the Franco-Prussian War had won him his first commission.

"Near the hair, on the left side of his head, was a great scar; deep, thin skin stretched over a gaping hole. A Dreyse bullet, received at the battle of Froeschwiller, had bared the brain. Bellani had survived by a miracle.

"Ten drinks did not begin to fuddle him. With a full bottle of absinthe poured into his stomach, he would walk out under a broiling sun, stumpy legs firm, chest forward, *kepi* tilted on his head to avoid pressure against the scar. Happy, truculent, boisterous, I never saw a man kinder to troopers, although his roar filled the courtyard. His standards were simple: A man should be clean in barrack, brave in action. Outside of these two principles, he forgave everything. Gambling, a scrap over women, a bayonet thrust through the arm were trifles. One

could not expect fighting men to live like school-girls.

"Concerning my own affair, he assured me I would be young but once. When I confided my intention of resigning from the army, he threw his hands high, reviled me, branded me a fool. In his opinion, a man should no more abandon the army than give up his salvation and curse his God.

"'I'd like to see her,' he said. 'You're probably foolish. Yet how can I know without seeing?'

Khadijah had often seen Bellani from a distance, felt no embarrassment at meeting him, trusted him as I did. She shook hands, paraded her stock of French phrases, laughed, delighted me with her gaiety. Bellani stroked her chin, pinched her ears, behaved more gallantly than one could wish.

"'What do you think of her, Captain?' I asked him as we rode back.

"'Pretty,' he replied, musingly. 'Frankly, I have known as pretty.'

"'No other woman ever meant so much to me, Captain.'

"'One says that, Cabassot. Then—' he blew on his bunched fingers, spread them swiftly fanwise: 'Good-bye!'

"His attitude changed from that day. Gradually, he tightened his hold upon my time, kept me busy afternoons, politely declined to let me go out at night. He acted with far more subtlety than one would have credited him with. His reasons were unanswerable. He was feeling unwell, there was work to be done, hostile natives were prowling about, he could not assume the responsibility of permitting me to go. The ban on the river for the privates was lifted. When I was free, the presence

of a dozen privates hovering near the stream prevented me from talking with Khadijah.

" Unable to endure the separation, I complained.

" ' I know what I'm doing,' he said. ' By the way, your resignation was not accepted. The best that can be done is to transfer you.'

" ' Why was my resignation refused ? '

" ' I recommended that it be thrown aside. By the way, I might as well inform you : Sidi Moussa had been ordered to disperse all these people he has bunched up here. The local tribes have complained that Sidi Moussa pays no pasture dues. That his animals eat everything. He'll have to go back to Kabylia, where he was told to remain.'

" ' What if he refuses ? '

" ' I'll have him arrested.'

" ' Listen, Captain, I once believed you my friend——'

" ' You did ? Then—what ? '

" ' Let me see her once more—to explain.' I watched his face eagerly. I had decided to send her to a friend, there to await such time as I would be allowed to leave. Thus, we would not be parted for ever.

" ' All right, Cabassot. Shall we say to-morrow night ? '

" ' Agreed. Thank you, Captain.'

" ' I saw her that afternoon for a few moments, told her to meet me at the usual place at the time stated. The following morning, Bellani called me.

" ' I'm sorry to disappoint you, Cabassot. You won't be free to-night.' He tapped a sheet of paper spread before him : ' There's a gathering of tents fifty kilometres from here, reported by our agents. Take sixteen men and investigate.'

" ' I can give you the information without——'

"'You've been to school, Cabassot, and should know what an order means, more than an ignorant fool like me. You'll take sixteen men and investigate. Is that clear?'

"'Yes, Captain.'

"The gathering of tents reported fifty kilometres away was so well known it appeared on the maps as the site of a permanent village. For a brief moment, I was tempted to circle, ride back, and meet Khadijah as agreed. But I had not reached the point of rebellion then, and I lived to regret it.

"When I returned to El Makbara the next day, I noticed unusual tension. The sentries were doubled, the infantrymen on the alert. A sergeant was distributing cartridges.

"'What's wrong?' I asked him.

"'The whole mob will be buzzing around here soon,' he replied.

"'What mob?'

"'Sidi Moussa's men.'

"'Nonsense. Why should he attack us?'

"'Yusuf was killed last night.'

"'By one of our men?'

"'By the Captain.'

"I entered Bellani's quarters. He was seated comfortably before a glass and a full bottle. Strange to say, he was sober.

"'I gather, Bellani, that you decided to keep my appointment yourself.'

"'Right,' he admitted, looking at me steadily.

"'You murdered the boy——'

"'What do you care? She ran off while we were quarrelling. No harm's done.'

"'No harm done—' I said, angrily. 'Sidi Moussa's men will be here soon, Bellani. You have killed a hundred men with one shot.'

"'Why don't you turn me over to them?' he laughed.

"'No. You're coming with me. Bring your revolver.'

"'A duel?'

"'Yes.'

"He followed me to the yard, mounted. We left the sergeant in charge. Near the river, two miles from the Post, I halted.

"'This place is as good as any other.'

"He stood legs wide apart, staring about him, smiling.

"'Surely,' he agreed. He took the gun from the holster.

"'We have not witnesses, we'll have to count ourselves. Fifteen paces——'

"'You seem to be running this, Cabassot. Walk—I'll start shooting when you give the word.'

I paced off the distance slowly, turned.

"'All right, Bellani——'

"He fired immediately. The first bullet came close enough to prove he was capable of handling the weapon. The second brushed my sleeve. I had lifted my own gun, biding my time. White against the tan of his forehead gleamed the scar. Try as I did, my eyes could fasten upon nothing else.

"He fell. Walking forward, I saw I had completed the Prussian's work.

"The village was not very far off. The first group of natives I encountered were hostile in attitude until they saw the body thrown across the saddle of the second horse. They did not understand what had happened, parted before me. I found Sidi Moussa in the centre of a gathering.

"'This is the man who slew thy son,' I said. 'There is no need of further revenge.'

"'There was to be no revenge,' he replied. 'It was written my son should die. It was the sign I awaited. To-day, we start for the setting sun. Save my daughter—who has told me——'

"Sidi Moussa strove to smile placidly. I knew how keenly he felt the degradation I had brought upon his name. An apostle, but he felt the scorn of other men near him, who glared at me and fingered their knives.

"You have seen a cyclone in the desert, Lartal. It leaps from the horizon in a resistless whirl, drives everything before it. The Tuareg say: 'The demon caravan is passing—a wedding has taken place and the bride is taken away—' It had been the same with my life. From the time I had met Khadijah, I had been whirled helplessly by events. I had ended by killing a Frenchman, following a quarrel over a native woman. Who would understand how the thought of his hairy paws grasping my woman's shoulders had stirred me?

"'Sidi Moussa,' I said, 'wherever thou shalt go, there will be needed a man to teach the young the proper manner in which to fight. I am that man. What my people have taught me shall serve thee.'

"'Think well,' he advised me. 'A man does not lightly give up his kind. I know, I, who spent years in France, who did not change. Thou art not of our faith.'

"'I am of thy faith,' I replied. 'Thy daughter's husband, thy son.'

"We had spoken in Arabic, so all had understood. A murmur of approval greeted my words. I dismounted, went to Sidi Moussa, rested my forehead against his shoulder. I was sincere in my admiration for him, sincere in my desire to serve him, to follow

and witness the success or failure of his great undertaking. It was thus I became a Mohammedan and followed Sidi Moussa into the west.

"It was a strange and wondrous journey. According to natural laws, the horde behind the leader should have starved, died of thirst and fatigue. The desert seemed as arid as I had always seen it. Yet, water and food always in plenty. One marvelled at the spectacle of thousands climbing higher and higher toward the cliff. No one knew where Sidi Moussa was taking us. We climbed, climbed, and in the faint moonlight, we saw those first trees. A great clamour rose. Many wished to halt there, thinking the end of the journey had come, Sidi Moussa urged them on.

"The sun rose as we were crossing the empty plain. All fell to the ground for the first prayer in the new land. Further, we discovered the other oases, then this slope. Below spread the fertile valley you shall see very soon. There were men living here when we came, a strange, forgotten people, the short, stocky fellows that now predominate among the warriors. They fell upon their knees as we approached. I believed Sidi Moussa when he assured me he had never been among them, yet they knew him, respected him. Later, I learned that the people below had hunted them down when they tried to reach the outside. They were primitives, knew neither guns nor powder. Soon, they were working beside us erecting the city.

"The stone tower went up—and when Sidi Moussa died a few years ago, he was buried at its foot."

CHAPTER XI

SI KHALIL stopped speaking.

The tinkling of the water dropping back into the pools broke the stillness. As the captain's eyes had become accustomed to the night, the square tower emerged among the stars, detached itself from the background of the slope.

Suddenly he became aware of a red glow to the west, as of a great conflagration.

"A fire, Si Khalil?"

"Where? Oh, they're working at the furnaces to-night. We make our own iron, smelt our own lead for bullets. There is a little of everything in the hills, even a small amount of gold."

"But why work at night when the flames can be seen for miles?"

"In the daytime, the smoke would be seen. Strange thing, Lartal—men would investigate a column of smoke beheld in the afternoon, but fear to approach fire seen at night. One must understand human reactions. This was Sidi Moussa's thought." Si Khalil laughed: "It does not please my business men in Morocco, that we should make our own ammunition. We refill the cartridges ourselves. And our steel is so good that we sell rather than buy."

"You are in touch with Morocco constantly?"

"Yes. I have men in Marakesh, at Dads, elsewhere. I have three caravan leaders. The best is Ahmed. They bring their own men. When they leave, we keep their families as hostages for their silence. Anyway, they are better off here and know

it. The Arab is a great liar when he elects to be, but can be tight-lipped when his interest is at stake. We are ruled by a sort of electoral system. Various trades unite to elect a representative, who in turn joins others in electing what might be termed deputies to the highest counsel. Something like the *jemma* system of Kabylia.

"I have no direct voice in the deliberations. I am the general, the military leader. I instituted compulsory military service—six months' training for all men, and, later in life, occasional service for a few days. When my advice is asked, I give it. Without particular training in trade or arts, I have the average officer's ability to dabble a bit in everything. I planned the fortifications. Many of the buildings here can be attributed to me. The school system is mine. There is still work to be done."

"You said you once had sons?" Lartal questioned.

"Yes, two. They were dissatisfied. They dreamed of the outside world. The first ran off, in spite of my advice, and was slain by a raiding band down below. When the second grew to manhood, he too became restless. This time, I gave my permission for him to join one of the caravans bound for Morocco. He went to France. I kept in touch with him through my Marakesh agent. He died of tuberculosis. Khadijah accepted her lot patiently. Sons are often born but to die. And she had a little daughter, Morjana, to console her. After Khadijah was gone, things were not the same for me. I grieved, I was sick. At last, upon pressure of the *jemma* I replaced her with another wife, then others. They mean nothing——"

"You had another son, you said."

"Yes. Very young, fifteen, of another breed.

His mother is an Ouled Sidi Sheik. He is a truculent little devil, rather ashamed of my origin, if I read him aright. He does not want to go away, that one! The Iron Mountain suffices for him. Already, he dabbles in things he should leave alone. He is among the malcontents. There are some who believe we should depart from the policy laid down by Sidi Moussa and ally ourselves with the more powerful of the raiding tribes. They point out the great loot that would be ours in exchange for a few warriors, and the promise of inviolable shelter."

"And your daughter, Si Khalil——"

"Morjana—you have seen her, Lartal."

"Morjana means *coral*——"

"She has always had red lips and bright cheeks. she is not as beautiful as her mother—but she is of the blood. Brave, curious, headstrong. You will like her."

"I do like her. Why else am I here?"

"You are a frank man, Captain Lartal. I knew, after she told me of you, what type you were. Not that you respected her—I am not bitter enough against Frenchmen to forget that they are at heart decent. But you did not even take her as hostage. And so—I sent for you——"

"There was mention of service to France."

"Indirectly, yes."

"The best I can possibly do is to remain until a force of occupation arrives at my request."

"The time for surrender to France is as yet twenty-five or forty years in the future. I brought you here for a very different purpose."

"I am—rather curious——"

"I have already told you there exists a party in favour of union with certain raiding tribes, warfare against the others. The *jemma* council of old men is

as yet staunch in the beliefs of Sidi Moussa, who wanted isolation, pointed out that contact with the outside brought only sorrow. They have to contend with the growing feeling among the younger men, who remember Sidi Moussa as an impotent old fellow who drooled into his beard. While all are Mohammedans here, tolerance has prevailed. The young wish to change that.

"Of late, there has come about a renewal of religious fervour. There are more ways than one to interpret the Koran. The military spirit has spread among the school teachers in some way. Under their tuition, the boys are growing up to hate strangers, men not of their faith, although they have never seen them. Instead of warriors for protection, they maintain we should send them out for conquest. Partly my fault. I have advised freedom of speech and teaching. A few weeks ago, when the council was in session, one of the members rose, and openly suggested an expedition against the nearest group of nomads.

"He is a new arrival among us. Somehow he obtained the goodwill of a great number of young men among the iron workers, jewellers, makers of leather-goods, all men, in fact, who would gain by a closer relation with the outside for the disposal of their products. He was ejected by the conservatives.

"The menace, however, must be admitted. A fine old gentleman, a great friend of Sidi Moussa and one of his earliest disciples, developed a theory which appears sensible. Despite scattered scoffers, Sidi Moussa is still believed by the mass of the people to have been an inspired man. Not a Prophet, for Mohammed was the last one—but a Holy Man. Sidi Moussa left no male descendants, although he

had several sons. They all died violent deaths. It is common knowledge that the nobility of Islam, the Sherifs, are descended from a daughter of Mohammed and his son-in-law, Ali. Sidi Moussa had a daughter, Khadijah, and a son-in-law—myself. The sons born from that union were dead. But the daughter lives.

"Therefore, a son of Morjana would be the true heir of Sidi Moussa, particularly according to the tradition of several Berber branches, including the Tuareg, which trace a man's blood through the woman. 'The belly colours the child,' it is said. Logically, the belief is sound. It is the exception when a woman marries beneath her in rank. But men are promiscuous. By tracing origin through women, one certainly assures legitimacy of birth.

"It was decided that Morjana should be married soon. All should be left in abeyance, until a son was born. The proclamation of an heir to Sidi Moussa might halt activities of the new party, give the mass something to look forward to. Morjana is eighteen. According to the custom among us, she should have married three years ago. But, perhaps through listening to her mother's talk of our meeting, she got the idea she should wed a Frenchman, a man of my race.

"Naturally, I could have forced her to marry a man chosen by me. I did not. To tell you the truth, I am half ashamed to confess it, I disliked the idea of her marriage to an Arab or Berber. Long ago, when she was very young, I promised her she should choose for herself.

"The newcomer, he who was ejected from the *jemma*, wants her. Not altogether to shape the destinies of her son, thus serving his own ambition, for he sought her from the time he first arrived,

before the decision to proclaim Sidi Moussa's great-grandson chief. I don't like him, probably because he is against my opinions in politics. He is handsome, young, very intelligent, and I believe would treat her decently. But Morjana stated, after one glance, that he made her flesh creep. She has very definite likes and dislikes. Before seeing him, she had seen your colleague, Lieutenant Brangin, I believe, is his name.

"I had heard of Brangin through my agents. A nice fellow, but not serious. The dignity of the *jemma* would fail to impress him. Also, his dash into the Pass, with his men bunched up together, had given me a poor opinion of his wisdom.

"Then your detachment appeared beneath the Cliff. I was absent from the city that day, inspecting the defences on the west of the valley. Morjana received the first news. She thought it was Brangin, returned for a second meeting. She determined to have a look at him, left a note for me, and raced for the Cliff, escorted by the blacks. They are fine fellows, taken from a caravan of slaves, and brought up in my establishment. They have one fault, they obey Morjana's slightest whim.

"As a rule, I back Morjana in everything she does. The man in charge of the Pass feared to offend me, permitted her to go below, escorted by Kumbaba. You caught her. She has since told me she was disappointed at first when she did not see Brangin. Then she liked you better than he. Don't be flattered, Lartal: Your superior rank, which she discerned quite easily, had much to do with her change of mind. The more she thought of you, the better she liked you. Not surprising: She's half-French, and wholly feminine. She would duplicate her mother's romance. I recall some sort of a theory to the effect

that a girl often loves a man because he reminds her of her father.

"The more she thought of you, the nicer you seemed. Even had your name not been written within the tunic, I could have identified you. In any case, we had intercepted drum messages of the raiding tribes, telling of your success against Bu Jemma."

"Why did not your daughter tell me of all this?" Lartal interrupted.

"I have often reproached her for being garrulous. She feared to talk too much. She's loyal to me, knows how I stand with the French, and did not want to bring trouble by talking rashly——"

"And what am I to infer from all this? Unless I am mistaken, a very flattering honour."

Si Khalil laughed:

"To be quite correct, I should have worn white gloves for the occasion. Captain Latral, I ask your hand in marriage for my daughter."

"What am I to understand by marriage? Does it entail perpetual exile here, among your people?"

"Not unless you so desire——"

"At the risk of appearing to lack in politeness, Si Khalil, I ask for time to think. Although I have lived a good third of my life among North Africans, I have not acquired your calm acceptance of certain things. Marriage is a serious thing with us."

"Bah! Recall that nothing would prevent you, later, from contracting a union more suited to your taste, in France. Our marriage is not binding to you."

"You consider me strangely inhuman, Monsieur Cabassot. Leaving aside the distaste I feel for—the rather exceptional conditions under which I

would become your son-in-law, there is the question of the son, that very son so needed for your plans."

"Have you, perchance, the bump of paternity so well developed in advnnce?"

Lartal shrugged.

"One becomes attached to a horse, to a camel. Admitting I should be free to leave, I might find myself bound here by a son, who, certainly, could not be taken away."

Si Khalil tossed pebbles into the nearby pool.

"What a queer chap you turned out to be, Lartal! You have come far, impelled by what might be termed *love* for my daughter. I know, and you know, it is the truth. Opportunity is given you, and you discover one hundred and one reasons to let it pass. In my days, men were not so cold-blooded. Act first, reason later."

"An affair so pre-arranged, somehow does not appeal to me."

"Because I spoke frankly." Si Khalil stirred uneasily: "Count the number of friends and acquaintances who married with civil and religious pomp, girls selected by reason, selections dictated neither by beauty nor affection. How many of your comrades in the service are married? How many have children? The children are left behind in France."

"That's different."

"Slightly. Here again I find myself in a ridiculous rôle. I was on the point of urging my daughter upon you like a slave-dealer or professional match-maker."

Lartal laid his hand on the old man's shoulder:

"Don't be angry, Si Khalil. I am not different from other men, and my desire is to accept. But I

have heard your story, know how much you are offering me. My doubts spring from a deep sense of my own unworthiness. There is something beautiful in—Morjana's soul, which I dare not crush."

"You have thought of her, then, since seeing her—even before I wrote?"

"I thought of her constantly. I felt that she was of my race—without quite knowing what that feeling was. One can see at a glance how she has been treated. And I, or another man, should pass by, and then leave her like a seduced kitchen-maid? What for? A bunch of leathery, half-savage fanatics?" Lartal brought his fist upon his knee: "I hesitate, you say? Naturally. I cannot see the rôle of the man as very pretty, you understand!"

"You do not look with pride upon your rôle of prince consort, I take it." Si Khalil laughed again. "Do you think you could repeat what you have just said, to her?"

"She has more fineness than you—her instincts are truer to her birth. She does not love me. Forced into marriage, she prefers a man who will leave—and prevent her from beholding her shame for ever."

"I believe I started where I should have ended, Lartal. It is not too late to mend. Come with me and see her."

"Useless."

"Are you afraid your resolution will vanish?"

"No."

"Then come along."

Si Khalil led the way to a vast apartment, evidently a reception hall. Only one torch was burning in a brass fastener. The corners were in obscurity. The floor was covered with thick rugs, the walls hung with heavy green stuff, ornamented with long

inscriptions embroidered in gold. A woman-servant, young and beautiful, brought a small metal stove. Si Khalil, talking to Lartal, absent-mindedly stroked her smooth shoulder. She smiled, giggled and looked at Lartal shyly. Behind her had entered a negro, bringing a tray on which were the utensils needed to make tea. Lartal handled his tumbler of scalding liquid gingerly.

"A welcome change from the banal orientalism of the Frenchified north," Lartal remarked.

"The tiles, rugs, brass-work, all came from Morocco," Si Khalil said. "I even have a piano. Transported in parts on camels, no one here has been able to assemble it. Down below, at my other residence, I have a phonograph, with records. I can tell you I was not the least astonished of the people here when a caravan leader brought it as a present from my Marakesh agent. I had the instrument two years before I knew the name. Found it in a catalogue, with a picture. First time I had heard singing in French for twenty-five years!"

"How did it affect you?"

"Made me homesick. Strangely enough, not for my country itself. I longed for the night dumps where I used to bellow and prance about during my student days. Until then, I had almost grown to believe the world had ceased to exist."

"I had the identical experience in a smaller way. I returned to France after a couple of years in the Sudan, and—" Lartal glanced up and stopped speaking.

Morjana was standing near the verandah door.

The light of the torch fell full upon her face. Under the shirt of silk, a rose glow could be discerned, the colour deepening in the folds near the breasts. Her round hips were fitted snugly by baggy blue

velvet trousers, from which her sandalled feet emerged, the toes small and pink against the blue wool of the rug. Seen thus, at a distance, she appeared taller, more stately than Lartal remembered. He had first seen a girl. He now beheld a young woman. Around her wrists she wore bracelets of gold, gold earrings shone against the coral-red cheeks. A chain of gold coins was wound around her neck, fell in glittering loops upon her white chest like a gorget of ruddy light.

Lartal rose.

"Come here, Morjana," Si Khalil invited in French. "Do you know who this man is?"

"The Captain—" she replied. Lartal found time to note that the title, thus pronounced with a faint lisping, rang with a note more charming than he had ever known. She offered her hand. Once more he felt against his palm the firm touch of her flesh: "I am enchanted to see you, Captain Lartal——"

"Much less than I, Mademoiselle."

She sank down, squatted native-fashion upon the rug. Lartal offered her a glass of tea before the servant could perform this duty. Heedless of Si Khalil's amused glance, he presented the sugar-bowl. Obviously she was not accustomed to being served by a man, and looked toward her father in embarrassment.

"Perfectly allowable in France," Si Khalil said.

"The privilege to serve you should not be left to menials," Lartal remarked.

"Eh, eh! Beware of the timid when they become bold," Si Khalil went on. "You led me to believe you were inexpert."

"One must always count upon inspiration, Si Khalil. By the way, for some reason, I cannot bring

myself to call Mademoiselle: 'Mademoiselle Cabassot.' Even less, that prefix: Morjana bent Si Khalil. Mademoiselle, how does one address you?"

"My name is Morjana, that is all."

"Well, Morjana—" Lartal hesitated. "I am trying to decide whether you are more charming as a prowler or within the walls of your father's home."

"I am the same everywhere, Captain Lartal."

"Not at all. It is only with an effort that I identify you with the sulky captive. And I am tempted to be angry with you for not speaking to me in my own tongue, a charity you might well have granted a poor devil lost far from his countrymen."

"You are like my father. Unable to speak ten words without saying I have done wrong——"

"Will you forgive me when I say you did at least one thing rightly? Paying me a visit was kindness itself. I apologize, however, for having profited by an error on your part."

"What error?"

"You mistook me for Lieutenant Brangin."

"A mistake I shall never make again, Captain."

"An ambiguous reply," Lartal pointed out.

The conversation halted momentarily, while Si Khalil explained the meaning of the word to his daughter. Lartal, amused, watched her. In her pupils he could see the reflection of the room, the brassy glow of the kettle bringing a tawny glint in the dark eyes. The faint perfume recalled the coolness of the rocks beneath the cliff. The reek of smoke from the tiny stove might have been the scent of charred wood rising from the *Meharistes'* fires. At his side, her head scarcely reached his shoulder——

Si Khalil encouraged Lartal to talk of himself, of his life. The captain, far from an egotist, nevertheless discovered a sudden pleasure in the topic.

At the end of an hour, Morjana rose, took leave, and left escorted by the servants. The patter of her sandals died away upon the verandah.

"I stay—" Lartal said, laconically.

Si Khalil ran his fingers slowly through his beard, and smiled.

"Those men of principles!" he concluded.

CHAPTER XII

THE following morning, Lartal was led by Si Khalil into a vast room on the ground floor of the building, a room separated from the open *patio* by a graceful colonnade of slender marble pillars matched by the round trunks of trees outside, and floored with mosaic.

Forty men were assembled there, white-bearded, simply clad in flowing white garments—the members of the *jemma*.

His mission on the Iron Mountain was evidently known. So much could be discerned in the humorous smiles, the leering, amused glances.

He acknowledged numerous introductions, heard patiently the long list of names, an endless string of Moussa, Mohammed, Ali, Hassan, crisply connected with the familiar *ben*. He liked the leader of the conservative party, a tall, skinny old man, clear-eyed and vigorous, Si Tabban ben Sulaye.

Despite the gravity of manner, the Roman bearing, it was soon evident that the meeting was informal. They had been meeting thus for thirty-odd years. Coffee and tea were brought. Many followed Si Khalil's example and smoked, in spite of the Koranic ban against the use of tobacco.

Lartal was flooded with questions on the latest developments in Algeria and Morocco, asked for his opinion on political affairs in Europe. The relations of the Sultan of Fez and the French were analysed, with better sense, Lartal thought, than was shown in the usual conversation among officers of his race.

Famous French leaders were referred to familiarly.

Canrobert was recalled, when the long-haired hero had been an officer in the Foreign Legion. One of the members, when a small boy, had followed the last cavalry charges at the Battle of Isly, where the French under Bugeaud had beaten the Moroccan Sultan's fighting men. Lartal felt as if he were handling dusty old tomes, long laid aside, filled with precious information. These men had lived history.

At last Si Khalil announced that Lartal had consented to fulfil the will of the *jemma.*

"The wedding had best take place soon," Si Tabban suggested. "Before that son of many fathers whom we expelled the other day repays us for our kindness with another bite."

"It was unwise to make an exception to our rule —not to admit outsiders," spoke another old man: "Although, in thy case, Captain, it was we who invited thee."

"Where did he come from, the trouble-maker?" Lartal asked.

"Who knows? None but Allah. He said he came from Tripoli. Words are easily spoken."

"How did he make fools of so many?" Si Tabban went on, as if answering Lartal's unspoken question.

"His words flow from his lips like water from a full pitcher. He is a Man of the Book, for he knows the Koran by heart. Based on little truth, he tells many lies. Yet when he spoke even we had to listen—until our wisdom came to our help. And we were pleased to listen. Seldom have we heard such an orator."

"A warrior?"

"No. A learned man."

"I should perhaps have told thee, Captain," Si Khalil said. "When the raiders pursued by Lieutenant Brangin entered the Pass to take shelter, he

was with them. Our men fired, and all dropped. They were believed to be dead. But one was untouched. Rising to his knees as our men approached, he begged for his life in the name of Allah and in the name of the Last Prophet. He kept them spellbound with his talk, and was spared until I arrived. At first I was angry. He had seen too much to be released. But it is difficult to kill a man who asks for his life in the name of Allah. I had him brought before me, and he spoke. He promised to come with me to the city, and there become one of us. I could see he was not an Ait Khebbash, that he came from afar. Also, that he was an intelligent man. I brought him here——"

"And here—" Si Tabban picked up the tale, "he spoke to the teachers, discussed the Koran with them. He told the iron-workers, the leather-workers, that their work was not paid at its right value. If the less capable workmen of Tafilalet obtained high prices for their soft, red leather, how much would be paid in Morocco for incomparably better products?"

"He is right," Lartal said. "Since last night, I have seen daggers, swords, spikes, jewellery—even the Jewish workers of Morocco cannot do better. And the dates grown here—they are of fine quality, and would sell for much up north."

"As I said before, he speaks truth at times," Si Tabban resumed. "But why did Sidi Moussa bring us here? So that we could live peacefully, without seeing, from time to time, our villages destroyed and our trees cut down. If we allow full trade, traders will soon be here from the outside—and once the way is found, when men come to us instead of waiting for our caravans to go to them, we will have no peace. Either the Sultan or the French will arrive and seek

a foothold. And our labour will be destroyed. Strangers can bring but one thing, pollution. We do not wish it."

"We spoke to the iron-workers," Si Khalil went on. "But our words were nothing compared to his. Even now that he has been sent away from our meetings, men still listen to him. At this very moment he is probably speaking and men are so pleased with the sound of his voice that they forget the emptiness of his soul."

Lartal turned slightly: In the *patio* were several men, evidently assigned to guard the *jemma*. Lean swarthy riders, supple athletes in gaudy yellow, red, lilac and mauve breeches, tan leather boots, pearl-gray cloaks. They bristled with knives and revolvers.

"Why not arrest him, place him in prison?" he asked.

Si Tabban followed his glance: "Those men out there, we have sent them to arrest him, but he speaks so well—and he is always surrounded by faithful followers. It would mean a small war—and Si Khalil advises against it."

"I do, Captain. At present the parties are nearly divided into equal numbers. The slightest jar would bring an explosion. We should wait until his prestige dwindles."

"Now that he has cast his eyes upon Morjana with longing," Si Tabban pointed out, "he will lose prestige when he loses her. Also thou, the husband, will be thought to have reason to look upon him unkindly. To avoid a clash, we can banish him from the city to one of the far oases in the west." He turned to the others: "We should hasten the wedding."

"Our custom is different from the Arab usage,"

Si Khalil said. "First, if you desire to marry my daughter, you must select a respected man to ask for her hand. I am presumed to know nothing until he speaks."

Lartal nodded. He addressed Si Tabban in Arabic, while Si Khalil rose unaffectedly, and strolled in the *patio*. Si Tabban declared himself honoured and surprised to be chosen as the captain's proxy. He rose and joined Si Khalil, to whom he spoke with many gestures. Si Khalil returned to the gathering, saluted gravely and announced the official demand for Morjana.

"It is the law," Si Khalil went on, keeping up the comedy: "All members of the bride's family must consent. There is but one member qualified to speak. My son Yusuf is too young. I accept."

"What day shall the wedding take place?" Si Tabban inquired.

"State a day, Captain," Si Khalil urged softly. "Remember, you're presumed to be eager."

"What's a reasonable limit?"

"The sooner the better in this case," Si Khalil prompted.

"The day after to-morrow," Lartal informed Si Tabban.

"A wise choice," Si Tabban replied. "That day is lucky."

"What of the dot?" some one questioned.

"True, there must be a dot," Si Khalil agreed.

"I won't be exacting," Lartal said, smiling.

"You don't get it, you give it!" Si Khalil reminded him.

"The devil! What does it consist of?"

"My family is pretty important. It must be at least twelve she-camels. Better say fourteen. Or an equal value in goods."

"Where do you expect me to collect fourteen fine camels? The only one I have is government property."

"Don't worry about the dot. We'll fix that up, Captain." Si Khalil dropped into the local dialect and explained to the others. "And I'll take care of the feast, supply the sheep."

"We're all your friends," Si Tabban added, tapping Lartal on the shoulder.

"You must designate a friend to bring the bride to you," Si Khalil continued.

"You won't do?"

"Allah forbid! I'm her father! The two rôles don't merge—here."

"I have a friend, Tlemsani, will he do?"

"Yes."

"I know he'll enjoy taking part. He loves official missions."

Si Tabban suddenly turned.

"Here comes Omar!" he said. "He has his courage to come here uninvited——"

"Omar—" Lartal repeated.

"El Hadj Omar ben Azziz," Si Khalil, explained. "We speak not his name often, seeking thus to make him unimportant in our own eyes, and others as well."

"Is he by any chance, one of the Senussis?" Lartal questioned.

"He is, or so he says. Thou hast heard of him?"

"I have. He is the foe of my people."

So this was the Senussi emissary, whose name was so reminiscent of Egyptian cigarettes and classical literature of the Orient, and whose activities so worried the French! Also he, no doubt, who had joined Brangin's detachment near the Well of El

Guizia, and who had been allowed to escape because he was a Holy Man.

Omar was dressed like the other members of the *jemma*, save for a brilliant silk sash showing through the folds of his cloak. He was handsome, stouter than the average Arab, his hands small, dimpled.

"Greetings to you, venerable men," he saluted, and took his seat among those in the rear ranks, as if there were nothing unusual in his presence. "I was told the *jemma* was meeting, and came."

"We see thee," Si Tabban informed him scornfully.

"Of what things are you speaking?"

Si Tabban indicated Lartal:

"This noble Captain has come among us, and will marry Si Khalil's daughter. Perchance such a thing will please thee as it pleases us."

"It is written in the Thirty-fourth Chapter of the Koran," Omar recited: "'And a bar shall be placed between them (the Unbelievers) and that which they shall desire.' This man is an Unbeliever. He desires the grand-daughter of Sidi Moussa. If his desire be granted, I have no part in the proceedings, though I be alone true to the Book. Oh, listen to me! Men such as he have slain the Faithful, polluted their mosques. Men such as he have seduced True Believers to combat those of their Faith. He comes, and ye allow him to steal your daughters to sate his vile desire. It is not his like which have crushed Islam, but those of Islam, who, like you, forget the precepts of the Book!"

"Thou speakest thus, who was sheltered among us, whose life was spared in the name of Allah," Si Tabban protested.

"I was fleeing from the Unbelievers. But recall the Fourth *Sura:* 'Whosoever fleeth from his

country for the sake of God's true religion, shall find upon the earth many forced to do the same, and plenty of provisions.' Elsewhere it is also written that those who serve Allah must be helped. Which of us is worthier, you who sheltered one who serves Allah, or he who serves Allah, and thus wins the right to shelter? Si Khalil—I have learned thou wert once a Christian, and it shall be accounted against thee on the Day of Judgment that thou didst seek a Christian to marry thy daughter, thereby showing the Faith which was on thy lips had not seeped into thy heart."

"A lie—" Si Khalil spoke calmly. But Lartal saw the old Frenchman's hand fumble for the weapons in his belt.

"Sidi Moussa accepted him for his son," Si Tabban explained. "What other proof is needed? Sidi Moussa read men's hearts, as thou dost read a scroll."

"A man may walk straight all his life, save for one single false step," Omar objected. "Even that single fault will be counted and recorded above."

"Once before, thou wert sent from here," Si Tabban warned.

"Unjustly. Deny my words—yet they are truth. I asked to wed Morjana and was derided. Yet the first Christian dog that comes is mated with her."

Si Khalil nudged Lartal, and the captain rose.

"But my patience is worn thin. I know of thee, and will bear insults no longer. Rise and go." Lartal crossed toward him and stood at his side: "Thou, who hast fled so often from the French and speak so boldly now—where is thy strength?"

Omar had risen, and stood, hesitating, off balance. Lartal jabbed an outstretched finger against his chest, sent him reeling. It appeared to others as if Omar had staggered from a slight tap.

"Be off—be off——!"

The Senussi, feeling that each moment added to his ridiculous position, hesitated, then walked away.

"Join the people in the feasting to-morrow!" Si Tabban called after him. "Eat the meat of the wedding—console thy heart by comforting thy stomach."

Lartal took advantage of the tumult and loud talking that followed Omar's exit to address Si Khalil.

"You prompted me to act. Did I do rightly?"

"Yes. There is a rule of the *jemma* against drawing steel during the meeting, although you would have been forgiven, for you did not know. But it is better thus." Si Khalil lifted his chin to indicate the guards in the *patio:* "They have seen. The tale will spread. His credit will be lessened."

"Perhaps you're right. Yet, see—the members are somewhat affected by Omar's words."

Si Tabban was gesticulating, in hot controversy with others, his voice shrilling high with an authoritative ring. Si Khalil stirred uneasily.

"Omar is a devil, Lartal. You heard what he said—nothing much, yet enough to perturb them. He bases himself on the Book at all times. We are like pupils discussing theology with an ordained priest."

Si Tabban approached.

"Frenchman," he said solemnly: "thou art a stranger. But learn: Not even the tip of one finger shall be laid upon a member of the council during session." He winked swiftly toward Si Khalil: "Ignorance can be forgiven once. More now: It would be best to prepare the wedding immediately."

"We take leave, then," Si Khalil replied.

He led the way through the *patio*, to the stables.

When certain they could not be overheard, he gave vent to his resentment.

"Si Tabban, the old hypocrite! My friend, of course, yet how long my friend if it became a question of choosing between me and his position? And the objection is strong: You are not a Mohammedan. Omar must be rushed off his feet, faced with the accomplished fact as soon as possible. Did you note the change of attitude among the *jemma?* In a few minutes of his talking, Lartal, in a few minutes——"

Negro soldiers had saddled the horses. Si Khalil indicated that Lartal should mount.

"Where are we bound for?"

"The main oasis, down below. I want to get you out of reach until time comes for you to appear again. It would be fatal to our plans to have you twisted about in an argument."

"Where is Morjana?"

"I sent her down ahead."

Lartal mounted, and turned to Si Khalil.

"Your blacks behave like regular soldiers."

"Recall, I am an officer of cavalry. Another cause for friction, though. Omar has pointed out that I keep a loyal force for myself, independent of other commanders here. He wants my negroes submitted to the orders of the *jemma.*"

"A reasonable enough wish from his point of view. They form a sort of Pretorian Guard—of great assistance to you, should you care to undertake a *coup d'état* and become dictator."

"His logic is above reproach," Si Khalil admitted. A gate swung open before the little group of horsemen, a narrow street opened, a sharp decline flanked by high walls. "Already, Lartal, I am forced to use caution, as you see. By this path, we avoid the crowded quarters."

They passed the western wall, took a road jutting like a ledge from the rock, a road not more than six feet in width. When Lartal approached the edge, he could see, far below, the green mass of thousands of trees, white walls and rounded cupolas.

"These horses are as sure-footed as mountain sheep," Si Khalil declared.

"And what is that place down here?"

"Gardens, orchards, my other residence, the private residences of the leading men."

"Same people as up here?"

"No. The land tillers predominate and many of the original inhabitants. At certain seasons of the year, the people of the city are allowed to go below in small groups. Many children there all the time, and the sickly. Oh, a marvel, that valley—one goes from the heat of the Sahara to the balmy atmosphere of Nice in a few hours."

"I suppose the land worker is the more loyal to the traditions of Sidi Moussa. It is the old story—the industrial worker is the progressive."

"You're right. I had not thought of it in that manner. At one time, the battalion guarding the Pass was recruited solely from the Valley. But, already, that has been changed."

"Do you know, Si Khalil, I believe that the El Hadj Omar of to-day is the Sidi Moussa of to-morrow. The possesion of rank is not his motive. Not even his desire for Morjana. He belongs to the Senussis, as you know, Pan-Islamists, preaching Moslem lands for Mohammedans. Clever doctrines, theirs. Take Omar—instead of immediately demanding alliance with other Mohammedans, he suggests expeditions for loot, trade, anything and everything that will bring your people in contact with others. Step by step, he seeks to direct the energies toward an

understanding, culminating, a year, ten years, two centuries away, it matters not, in an attempt to bring a triumph of the Faith. The Turks, the British, the French, all fear the Senussis, fear the slow rotting underneath the feet of their Colonial structure.

"In the Sudan, the Senussis emissaries have combated our missionaries with much success. It is difficult to convict them of attempted sedition, they flourish under our very eyes. They're a moral rather than a physical force, and as such, more dangerous. You, yourself, are aware of insecure footing since Omar has been at work. And he is only one man."

"What should be done?"

"It may be too late. You should have taken him from circulation the day he came here."

"A repugnant method to me, Lartal."

"Justified if you sincerely believe it would be for the ultimate good of your people. In time of emergency, strong measures become necessary. Your people are undergoing a tumultuous period of readjustment. It's a question whether you wish to preserve your national identity, or become part of a bigger thing, the union of Islam. Wise gentlemen have argued the question for years in other lands, without arriving at a conclusion."

"These very men clamouring for contact with the outside are the sons of those who praised Sidi Moussa for taking them away——"

"The difference between a full stomach and an empty one. Seriously, what was good forty years ago is not necessarily good now."

"And we fought the Sultan's soldiers only to give up our isolation now!"

"I know how you feel, Si Khalil," Lartal declared. "I, too, since my betrothal to your daughter, have

become a conservative. I am for keeping up the venerable traditions. The man on top regards matters differently from those below."

Si Khalil, riding erect in the saddle, as firm as a young man of twenty, touched his beard lightly with the right hand.

"Had I your youth and my acquired ruthlessness, Lartal—Omar would have been out of the way long ago. Had I not feared for Morjana if I lost out, I might have played a bolder game. You saw to-day—the native character, stolid and unchanging in certain paths, mobile and treacherous as water in others. I have been among them many years—and cannot predict their reactions. There is a subtle ingredient in their souls, a metal unknown to us. Khadijah knew, and was able to advise me. My other wives—I have little illusion, Lartal," Si Khalil grumbled bitterly: "toys at first, cows later. If I listened to their tales—Allah forbid! Morjana is more French than I. I brought her up close to me; she has had little contact with the women of her mother's people save servants. No—I'm alone, now, Lartal, alone——"

Brassy notes blared behind them. Lartal, startled, turned and saw one of the blacks holding a trumpet to his lips.

"That sounds strange here!"

Si Khalil beamed: "I had trouble enough obtaining them. Letters to my agents in Marakesh were relayed to France, misunderstood, wrongly translated. I received brass instruments enough to outfit a regimental band, but it was years before the trumpets arrived. Yet what a triumph it proved for me, when my first pupil performed decently, and I could awake to the old call. Listen, that's the answer from the house."

The mellow notes, muffled by the foliage and distance, strung out like beads of a rosary, in the stillness. The horses tossed their eads, touched the ground with a swifter pattering of hoofs, and trotted briskly down the last slope on to level soil, a grassy stretch sweeping to the first grove of orange trees. In an artificial brook, clear water flowed. From this main artery, smaller ditches issued in all directions, bridged by tiny spans of masonry, the curbs crested with brilliant red tiles.

Beyond the orange trees a grove of fig trees, and nearby, the first village. Squat stone structures, roofed with red tile, unveiled women—many of them as fair as Flemish girls under the light tan—half-naked healthy children, broad-shouldered, heavy-gaited men. They greeted Si Khalil respectfully, with uplifted hands, and stared curiously at the new face, where few new faces ever came.

Save for a solid blade carried in a sheath hanging upon the chest, a tool rather than a weapon, the men were unarmed, pacific in aspect. One of the negroes, showing his zeal, took the lead, scattered the people with gestures and fierce cries, imitated mockingly by well-muscled boys who raced along by the horses.

"Here, Si Khalil, an orange!"

Si Khalil caught the fruit, thanked the giver.

"Here, another, for thy daughter's husband!"

"Many thanks," Lartal called out."

"Oranges, lemons, grenades, peaches, apricots—where else have you seen all this, Lartal, where have you smelled such perfumes? This, rather than the city above, is what Sidi Moussa dreamed of, what he saw with the eyes of his soul, long ago."

They entered a long corridor under the palms. Beside the beaten earth road flowed a deep stream of water, on a bed of round pebbles. In the crystal of

the fluid undulated a streak of blue, the reflection of the sky, and there moved also the feathered shadows of the leaves.

"This shows the goodwill of man, as well as the kindness of Allah," Lartal said with unfeigned admiration.

"We had among us men from the small oases, men who had struggled hard for little. They worshipped this place, and their adoration still lingers. To them, this was—and is—Paradise. One must have fought drought to appreciate a limitless supply of water."

Lartal looked up toward the vault of leaves, almost closing vision of the sky. The cool air flooded his lungs.

"Like a swallow of champagne," he declared.

A few minutes later, they halted before a wall cutting through the vegetation. One of the blacks beat with the butt of a carbine against a heavy wooden door. When it was opened, Lartal passed into a garden. On the right, he saw several stone buildings, stables evidently. He dismounted, turned his horse over to the negroes.

"We go on foot," Si Khalil stated. "I don't want the paths torn up."

The lanes were paved with blue tiles. Si Khalil glanced at the captain with a certain satisfaction.

"Pretty, eh? Never saw anything like this at home, did you?" He stopped short, then went on quickly: "Here's my son. Don't take him too seriously. Only a kid, but the conceit of Satan."

Yusuf approached majestically. Five foot seven at least, his youthful face belied the affected manly bearing. A thin face, high cheekbones, and a cruel mouth, a first impression of arrogance that struck Lartal disagreeably.

Yusuf eyed his father's guest gravely, steadily.

"I was told thou wert here," he said, after a sketchy gesture of salutation. "Thou art a Frank, like my father?"

"I am."

With another gesture of vague courtesy, Yusuf stepped aside.

"I believed thee at the Pass, Yusuf," Si Khalil said.

"I came back during the night, father."

"Why come back without order?"

"To speak to my sister."

Si Khalil shrugged, nodded, and led Lartal forward.

"Go on!" the old man exclaimed, when they were at a distance from Yusuf. "Speak out! A damned sulky fellow, isn't he?"

"The fact is, I don't seem to please him." Lartal agreed.

"Sometimes I wonder how much of my blood is in him. My fault partly. He didn't elect a crazy woman for his mother. I did. I feel constantly as if he belonged to another species. Not a streak of fun in him. One thing, though, he has spirit. If he wants to do a thing he does it, knowing he'll be punished. I put him at the Pass to get him away from a bunch of flatterers hanging around him in the city. Told him not to move without permission. Yet, here he is." Si Khalil reflected: "He has the pride and intolerance of an Arab and the meanness of a French trader's son."

"You cannot be accused of fatherly blindness——"

"Took me a while to see clearly. He heard Omar speak a few weeks ago. Instead of coming to me with the same airy arguments, based on vague business notions, he brought me sheets covered with figures, indicating the profits to be derived from open

trade and the organisation of a few raiding bands. My brother, the manufacturer, could not have done better. Oh, he's mine, all right, and I had best shoulder the responsibility." He halted, and stretched his hand forward: "Enough of him. Here's my place."

"You didn't lose by exchanging the tunic for the *gandoura!*" Lartal exclaimed. "At least not in material comforts. It will be some time before the Government supplies us with marble palaces!"

"As easy to obtain as building stone. And the labour costs nothing."

Si Khalil exhibited a satisfaction beyond good taste, but Lartal realised that he was the first Frenchman to visit him. The oasis residence was not as large as the structure in the city. Walls of white marble, a slender colonnade separated the verandah from the open. The first room was walled with white-veined black marble. The next was translucid, rose-tinted onyx.

"I had this erected as a sort of joke on all those fellows in the north who pride themselves on their marbles," Si Khalil went on. "Later, I'll show you around a bit. I have green silicious marble better than any ever drawn from the quarries of Cape Falcon. I have one block measuring fifteen by ten, after cutting and polishing, without a flaw." He indicated a chiselled panel: "And I have artists, too. If they weren't limited to geometrical patterns by their silly religious rules, what artists! And if you weren't limited by a lot of silly notions, Lartal, all this would be yours——"

Lartal began to see that Si Khalil's enthusiasm had a purpose. And when he saw the pleading glance, he understood even better. Callous as he appeared to be, the old Frenchman did not relish the

thought of the ultimate abandonment of his daughter.

"You could have an active life here, Lartal," he declared. "Mix in politics—they'd accept you after a while. You wouldn't be reduced to the rôle of a drone in a bee-hive, you know!"

"I suppose not——"

They ascended the terrace overlooking the *patio*.

"Over there are my private quarters," Si Khalil indicated. "And there—Morjana's."

"A whole wing to herself! She deserves a major-general, rather than a captain——"

"My first wife's apartments. I'm sentimental, though you would not suspect it."

"And where am I to stay?"

"In this building. By the way, I thought you might not like to be altogether alone until to-morrow. I must go back and settle matters before night. Your man is here—Tlemsani."

"I'm glad of that. I did not wish to offend you by inquiring if he were well taken care of. I worried a bit——"

"He asked to see you." Si Khalil called, a servant appeared: "This fellow will take care of you, Captain Lartal. Ask for whatever you desire. I think the cook can even be coaxed to prepare a decent meal for a Frenchman. I must leave you for the present. I'll see you in the morning."

Presently Tlemsani appeared, and then Si Khalil left.

If Tlemsani had been astonished by all he had seen, worried at the prolonged separation from his chief, he gave no sign. He seemed impressed by the solicitude of the servants for his comfort. He had not expected such perfect happiness before attaining Paradise. He had eaten much, drunk, smoked, had learned that all joy was not banished from the Iron

Mountain. The dancing girls of the north, he vouched, were no prettier than those of the local cafés.

"Didst thou see any one known to thee, anywhere, Tlemsani?"

"No man I knew by sight, no, Captain."

"And El Hadj Omar?"

"Thou hast been told. Yes, I did see him."

"It was known to thee he was not in the east, when I spoke, long ago, at Tabelkala?"

"Yes, Captain. But had I spoken then, it would have been said that I lied. I heard from the others, that he had been caught and escaped but I had not seen with my own eyes."

"And thou wouldst have permitted me to go far on a fool's errand!"

"If such had been the will of Allah, Captain."

"We will remain here until to-morrow, Tlemsani. What will we do to pass the time? Dost thou know, man of wide knowledge?"

"Yes, Captain." Tlemsani picked up a padded stroker, tapped a gong. A negro appeared. "Meat," Tlemsani said, "and honey."

"Hast thou not eaten to-day?"

"I have, Captain. But—I am hungry again. And the food a man takes into his belly—that no other man can take from him."

CHAPTER XIII

TLEMSANI had learned to appreciate each fleeting smile of fortune, knew how to make the most of an opportunity for luxurious existence. Under Lartal's amused glance, he consumed prodigious quantities of roast mutton, millet porridge, sour milk and honey.

Later, he called for perfumed water in which to rinse his hands, giving orders to the black with the stern face of a Sultan. Then he tried to converse with his chief, relighting an ever-cold pipe. Presently one of the divans against the tiled wall lured him. He prodded the mattress with an inquisitive fist. Satisfied, he removed turban, cloak, *gandoura*, and stretched out at ease.

He was soon asleep, breathing rhythmically, the hair of his beard stirring gently with each exhalation. The tuft of gray hair, sprouting from a shaven skull, by which he hoped to be lifted up to Heaven by the Angel of Death when his hour came, glinted like metal in the diffused light seeping through the blinds. Under the elastic envelope of skin, gaunt muscles stood out. His ribs were like the hoops of a decrepit barrel.

The black had brought some of Si Khalil's "medicine,"—an assortment of bottles. With a full glass on the low table before him, a good cigar between his teeth, the time was ideal for reflection.

"To resume, here I find myself, comfortably installed in a palace. No one wishes me harm—to be correct, no one seems powerful enough to harm me. It appears that I detached myself on a mission which almost any man of my rank in the army

would accept. In a few hours I'll be married, native style, to a very charming young woman, of whom I know little save that she can be stubborn. Yes, stubborn. In spite of the old gentleman's statement to the effect that he would not force her to marry a local youth, I rather feel it was her decision which decided him.

"There's a clause in the matrimonial arrangements that nettles me. Although I don't know why it should. Back home, I'll be damned if a son of Paul Lartal would ever have the chance to become the king of a mountain village. But suppose my first-born is not a son?

"Hoping for the best, I'm stuck here for probably a year. And when I do go back, how will I be received? Of course, I found Omar up here—and who will say that I did not hear of his presence before, that I was not employing that initiative so highly recommended subalterns and staff officers? With a little dexterity and a good deal of luck, I may get off lightly. Naturally, my major's commission goes up the spout for a time.

"In the meanwhile, tiled bath, beautiful rooms, horses, hunting—there must be Barbary sheep around. And interesting companions—Cabassot cannot be called banal. For an officer who selected North Africa as a field, a few months spent here is an education in itself. Vasil, and other chaps who make a hobby of collecting native arts, might be better able to appreciate the rugs, inlaid coffers, tables, fine arms that ornament this apartment. For some reason, green marble does not thrill my soul. But the gardens, the oases—and Morjana——

"So much for the bright side. Let me face an eventuality. Si Khalil loses his grip. Si Tabban changes camp, as he is apt to do. Ancient methods

are brought to bear to convince Morjana of Omar's superior qualities as a spouse. My candidacy is therefore annulled, void. My reason for being here is removed. Is Captain Lartal, poor unfortunate soldier, to be allowed to go home and talk of what he has seen? His tongue might wag. And in this corner of the Earth, they sever the tongue at the neck. There is also the cheerful possibility that the venerable Berber custom of execution might be chosen—stoning. I, who have been fanned by lead a dozen times, may meet my finish under a hail of rocks! Perhaps, quietly considered, it would have been best had I not encountered Mademoiselle Cabassot."

The call to prayer rose from the outside.

"Should I awake Tlemsani? What is the proper conduct for a friend in this emergency? If the old proverb is right: 'He who sleeps, dines,' it can be stretched to: 'He who sleeps, prays.'"

Lartal rose, moved about leisurely.

An unoccupied divan offered itself. It was soft beneath the fingers, yielding under one's weight. The smell of oranges swept through the room with the cool breeze. Doves were cooing outside. An immense laziness floated over the world. Tabelkala was very far away, very far——

A soft swish on the tile: the cigar had dropped from between the captain's fingers, lay in a scattering of grayish ashes, from which thin, blue smoke rose, a ribbon of vapour lifting, lifting, floating like a veil of sheer silk, then vanished.

.

"Captain! Captain!"

Lartal opened his eyes. A small round mirror in a gilt frame hung on the opposite wall no longer glowed with a tawny reflection, had been

transformed into a disc of silver. The room was flooded with a bright light, Saharan moonlight. Each feature of Tlemsani's face could be distinguished perfectly.

"Thou hast slept long, Captain. It is night."

"All the more reason why I should sleep, Tlemsani."

"Not so," Tlemsani protested. "One sleeps early, and awakens in the middle of the night. Tomorrow we must ride to the city, take part in the feast, which will last long. Soon after, the wedding comes."

"Now that I am awake, what is there to do?"

"The black said cushions had been placed on the terrace, should we wish to seek the cool air."

From the verandah, the view over the gardens was magnificent. The moonlight drenched the landscape like vaporous quicksilver. Remote, the lights of the city blinked among the stars. The leafy trees were like black metal carvings against the sky. Holding up one hand, Lartal could see the lines of his palm. The moon beat down like a spectral sun, darting blue-white rays. The eyes were bewildered by the perspective. The planes appeared to crowd close behind each other, like the flat scenery in a theatre. In the aisles strolled groups of negroes, the white tissue of their clothing standing out in snow patches, slashed by black shadows. A jet of water cut the foliage, a shaft of crystal emerging from a rippling mirror.

"Hast thou seen anything like this before, Tlemsani?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Boaster! Where?"

"When I was very thirsty in the desert. I saw

such a moon, such trees and such water many times —in the mirage of thirst."

On the terrace another spectacle awaited them: the other wings of the building, shining like diamond walls. And on the roofs, white-robed figures were grouped. Clear laughter, piercing exclamations, a snatch of song.

"Women!" Tlemsani announced cheerfully.

"Si Khalil's wives and their servants, Tlemsani. Nothing for worthless soldiers such as we."

"Perhaps thy woman is among them."

"I know not. But who told thee of all this?"

"The black, Kumbaba."

"I have selected thee to bring my bride to me."

"It will be done properly, Captain. With much shooting of guns and stamping of hoofs. For I believe it is among these men the custom to simulate attack."

"We will be here long. Wilt thou also wed?"

"No, Captain. I have no fortune, no youth. And I still owe part of the dot of one wife."

"Where is she?"

"I think in Ouargla, Captain."

"And what does she do while thou art away so long?"

"Do women pine for want of a man, Captain? She will say when I return: 'I remember thy face. Thou art my husband.' Then all will be as it was before." Tlemsani added piously: "If Allah wills."

A tom-tom pulsed in the distance. Excited shouts echoed. Lartal recognised the rhythm of a negro dance. A *Bamboula* was in progress near the black's quarters.

"I recall such a night," Tlemsani resumed: "It was far in Darfur, before the arrival of the English.

A Portuguese had hired me and others to capture blacks——"

The narrative unfolded, studded with startling incidents, deeds of valour, mad rushes and surprises, the butchering of men. Before wielding a carbine for France, Tlemsani had been somewhat of a brigand, by his own report. When an extinguished pipe threatened the flow of words, the captain held out matches in silence.

"There was a tall man who would not give up, a big black, such as Messaoud. He stirred so much he bruised the necks of the negroes tied with him. So he was shot—he was causing too much suffering to others." Tlemsani paused, until Lartal had grunted his praise for the slaver's humanity.

The hours passed. One by one the figures on other roofs rose and went below. A bugle halted the tom-tom beat, as the stroke of twelve changed Cinderella's carriage to a pumpkin. A quiet settled over the oasis, a hush broken only by the faint squealing of bats flying softly overhead.

Tlemsani's voice trailed off into shorter syllables, diminished, ended. Against the sky, in the direction of the city, the red flames of the ironworks, flared intermittently.

"Everyone has gone," Lartal remarked. "We might as well go down also."

"Not all," Tlemsani said. He indicated with the stem of his pipe: "Two women left, across the courtyard."

A new interest now kept Lartal on the terrace. The women were on the roof of the building pointed out by Si Khalil as that occupied by his daughter.

"One sings, Captain. Dost thou understand?"

"Yes, I listen."

The untrained voice was warm, vibrant. But it was not the voice of Morjana, of this Lartal was certain.

" I saw thee, I saw thy hands playing in the moving sand——
And thou wert like a statue of white salt,
The white salt of Taoudeni, which is the whitest!
And thy slaves admired thee, prone at thy feet,
Like the stars of night around the proud Moon!"

" An old song," Tlemsani said, loudly.

" Be silent. They'll hear thee and depart."

" Thou dost not know women," Tlemsani retorted. " Do women sing for the moon only? They have seen us. They know we are strangers. It is for us they sing. Shall I answer? "

" Yes——"

Tlemsani rose, stretched his arms toward the far terrace, like a man groping in the darkness, and sang:

" How bright the moon to-night!
She has increased her light——
To light my road to my beloved one.
And when the sand fills my grave
Neither sunlight nor moonlight will my eyes behold—
But through the sand thy face shall shine——
For even dead—I shall see thee."

In his long journeys, the Arab had learned things other than camel-lore and fighting.

" Bravo, Tlemsani ! " Lartal said.

" We wait for the answer, Captain."

The women were seated close together, their heads almost touching. Then the new verse was sung, evidently selected after a consultation :—

" Atop of the hills, the shepherd beholds the Moon——
His arms are stretched, and love's in his heart.
Yet what man can attain the Moon,
What man can call the Moon his own? "

" They are mocking us," Tlemsani grumbled. He called out : " Beware. We are not shepherds."

A stifled laugh reached Lartal's ears. In that moment it did not seem strange to him that having seen Morjana but twice, he should know her laughter.

" Were we not guests in this house," the Arab went on, " we would soon show them how the moon is brought down from the sky ! "

Lartal shared Tlemsani's irritation. There had been a deliberate effort to taunt them from a distance. Moreover, Morjana was his fiancée. She had wanted a Frenchman, she should accept French customs. A man should have at least one interview with his fiancée before the marriage ceremony. A cavalryman afoot, a sabre with a wooden blade, a lover hesitating on a moonlit night, were equally ridiculous.

Stepping to the edge of the terrace, Lartal looked down :

Forty feet separated him from a marble pavement. He had better select a safer, if less romantic road. Tlemsani followed him down the stairs without special invitation. They encountered difficulty in the maze of rooms on the ground floor. At length they reached the *patio*. There they were halted by a negro.

" You cannot come here," he warned.

" It is our friend, Kumbaba. What art thou doing here, black face ? "

" On guard, Captain."

" And who told thee I could not come here ? "

" No man can pass at night, not even Yusuf."

One moment the captain was staring into Kumbaba's eyes, the next, there was no one before him. Tlemsani had tripped the black, was holding him down, mastering him, as he had mastered him at the foot of the cliff.

" Take his gun, Captain."

Lartal deprived Kumbaba of carbine, pistol and knife, which he tossed behind a row of shrubs. He hesitated, then sacrificed Tlemsani.

" Hold him here, until I come back."

The stairway leading to the terrace followed the same plan as the one in the other wing. He emerged on the flat roof before the startled girls.

" Beautiful night," he said in French.

" You cannot come here," Morjana said angrily.

" I beg your pardon for proving you wrong. I am here."

" The negro will call others——"

" Do not worry. My man has convinced him that I am acting according to regulations. And don't throw up your hands thus—he is quite safe."

" And why do you come ? "

" What a question ! To become acquainted. It's about time, don't you think ? There are all sorts of things to discuss. I may have little faults—it's barely possible you may have big faults." He laughed. " I know one already."

" Which one ? "

" Too much dignity." He lifted her hand to his lips. " That's very annoying to a simple fellow like myself. Come, admit you're glad I came here ? "

" If we are seen together—are you mad ! "

" More than a little. About you. Why did I come to the Iron Mountain ? But who can see us

here? We dominate the universe. The servant—send her away."

Morjana laughed.

"She's gone already."

Lartal hesitated, tried to appear at ease, released Morjana's hand:

"I meant no offence."

He saw her smile. A necklace sparkled on her bare throat as she breathed. From the shadows beneath her brows, the gleam of the eyes stabbed softly into his own pupils. Of the two, she was the less perturbed.

There was something majestic in her poise. She appeared to him, in the shimmer of moonlight, an idol, a barbaric idol, oppressing him with an unknown, stifling charm.

From the sleeveless garment, the round arms emerged, smooth as ivory, white with a strange, unreal pallor. Before her warm young body, he sought vainly for the passion he once believed had swayed him. There was nothing in his heart save an all-flooding, exhilarating, gentle tenderness. Respect, bordering on adoration, rendered him mute.

Suddenly the ignominy of his bargain struck him with full force. His first impulse to refuse had been his real sentiment. This was not a girl to be abandoned, forgotten, an ordinary native woman more wise and crafty at fourteen than a European of twenty-five. She was the victim of impulse, pressure, preferring an indifferent man of a superior race to a lover of native stock. Old Cabassot was a criminal, not for murdering a drunken old captain, but rather for instilling in his child ideals and instincts which would cause her suffering. A son to take leadership—that was what she meant to the blind fools about her——

"You say nothing, Captain Lartal——"

"There is little to be said, Morjana, after all."

She sat upon the pillows, invited him to join her with a gesture. He squatted beside her stiffly, one arm embracing his knees, and sought for words to express the tumult of ideas.

"I have been bold, Morjana, and again I beg your forgiveness."

"It is a courtesy to return a visit, isn't it? I visited you."

"Yes. And what a fine mess you started! Had I not seen you, I would be peacefully doing my duty a thousand miles away."

"Were not a man born, he would never die."

"Understand me—so far as my own desire is concerned, I know no place in the world where I would rather be. Yet, I wish matters were different. Deep within you, I'm afraid you hate me——"

"Why?"

"For being forced upon you. I have no illusions. But I would have loved you anywhere, sought your love in return. Morjana, you cannot understand—just how different the love I have for you is from what you believe it to be. One has to be a man to understand—" He paused lamely. The thoughts were clear, yet he searched in vain for expression. He hesitated to speak coarsely, yet French words did not always ring with true meaning in her ears. "I mean—my love is such it makes me suffer to think another man might be here, another Frenchman—and you would be just as pleased."

"Perhaps not."

"It is not flattering to feel, when I dare think, that my path was prepared, that you were forced to accept me. I have not won, Morjana. You had no choice."

She laid her hand on his: "You wish I had gone to see you instead of your friend the Lieutenant. Isn't that what you wish, Lartal?"

"In part, yes."

"But how could I have, when I had never seen you, Lartal?"

"Right. Please don't call me Lartal," he added. "My name is Paul." He was annoyed when she laughed, tried to ascertain in what manner he had caused amusement.

"You are queer. You came to the terrace strong as a lion. Now you complain. Did I bid you come?"

"No," he retorted impatiently. "But had it been Brangin, you probably would have!"

"No more than you."

"And no less, either."

"I say again: I had never seen you then," She touched his hand with her palm, softly: "Don't you understand? Why are you here and not he? Who chose?"

"You?"

"Who else? My father? He does as I say. I love you, too——"

"You've never seen anyone else."

"I saw Lieutenant Brangin," she reminded him.

"A great glory—one out of two!"

"Are you going to be my husband day after tomorrow?"

"It seems that way."

"And you love me, you say?"

"I do."

"Then why do you worry so?"

This argument was not devoid of logic. Had he left Tlemsani sitting upon Kumbaba, to waste a

splendid evening? He could imagine Tlemsani's disgust, could he know the use his chief had made of the freedom thus obtained.

He closed his fingers around Morjana's hand. He pressed his lips on the slender fingers, on each dainty knuckle, kissed the wrist where the pulse quickened. He waited for a protest, a gesture of annoyance. And, just how he could not tell, he found her wide eyes before his, felt warm lips upon his own. Breathless, gazing dizzily up at the stars, he discovered that she had slid closer to him on the pillows, that his arms were around her, her hands caressing his cheeks. He doubted the reality of this unexpected embrace. One moment, they had been gravely discussing their relationship like sane persons, the next—to make certain he had not dreamed, he kissed her again.

"That other captain," she whispered, "the one my father had to kill long ago—I had been told of him—and so that night when you came toward the tent, my heart stopped beating—but you only wanted to make sure I was asleep——"

"That was all——"

"I had bruises on my arms and shoulders. I didn't mind, though. I kissed them."

"No more bruises. I can't spare the kisses," he informed her gravely. "Now, what else did you love me for?"

"Everything you said—everything you did. And you—you loved me from the first, also?"

"From the first—even before I saw you."

"And after—after you went away? You wanted to see me again, you thought of me?"

"Too much. Every hour of the day, every hour of the night," he held her close, stroking her face, pressing his palm against her smooth skin, as if to absorb

her beauty through his pores. "Each day and all days."

He remembered this was the truth, recalled Vasil's worried face across the dining-room table. Poor Vasil, he had something now to fret over; the sophisticated little captain, whose heart shed love affairs as a cabbage sheds its leaves. It would certainly amuse him could he hear the braided automaton, as he had called Lartal, babble silly phrases into a girl's ears!

"You have many women in France?" she asked.

"None that I care for."

"You don't love any of them better than you love me? You don't want to go back?"

"Not until you send me away, Morjana."

"Then I am happy, for that will never be."

"And you? Did you ever love anyone else?"

"Never."

"Yet, there must have been many who wished to marry you."

"Because I am Si Khalil's daughter, yes. There was a big man, the son of a Kabylian and one of the Mountain women. He is a soldier, commanding two hundred. He smells of camel, and cannot speak plainly. Many times, when I passed near him, his mouth would open, yet no words came. I laughed when my father told me he wished to have me in his house."

"And you love me, who have no house!"

The reminiscences of Si Khalil's daughter were halted for several minutes during the consecration of the discovery: she loved him, who had no house.

"Then also, there was the son of another member of the *jemma*. His horse threw him down in a public place! You would have laughed."

" It is essential that I keep in the saddle to retain you ? "

" If you fell, I'd only fear you were hurt. I laughed because I did not like him."

" So you cared for no one."

" Two I might have loved."

" Who were they ? "

" The Lieutenant. I liked him because he was so angry at being beaten. Also, because he smiled when I gave him oranges. He is very handsome, his eyes——"

" I never noticed them particularly," Lartal said, stiffly.

" But that was before I had ever seen you," she reminded him.

" Fortunately," Lartal remarked, with a hint of sarcasm. " And the other whom you liked—there were two, you said."

" Omar, the preacher. He stands so straight, and he also is handsome. But he frightens me, too."

" Your father said you didn't like him."

" I don't—because he is making trouble. But—he is handsome. When he talks all must listen. Yusuf, my brother, came back with words from him this afternoon. He calls you a pagan, one who eats pig. He is very good-looking."

" You've said so three times——"

" Three times——"

" No less. Why didn't you take him for a husband ? " Lartal half rose. " Why send for me ? "

" You're angry ? "

Lartal laughed : " I know when anyone's trying to make me jealous. I don't like it."

He shook off her hands, and rose.

" Where are you going ? "

" It's late. Tlemsani must be tired——"

" If you worry so about your Arab, go——"

He bowed and turned toward the stairs. What a fool he had proved with his hesitations, his exaggerated respect. She thought one man as good as another. To be compared with Brangin and the Senussi in one breath! There was only one way to treat a woman of her type, part native. Blows. His only margin of superiority the brutal handling at the foot of the Cliff. A pretty animal—that was all.

Yet, in the few steps separating him from the stairs, his reason returned. He had plied her with questions, then become angry at her frank replies, which, on the contrary, should have proved her love. He was compelled to admit himself jealous, jealous without reason. Lucky, whispered his new philosophy, to be jealous without reason. He hesitated, struggling with false pride, turned. She was close behind him although he had believed her still seated on the pillows.

" I should not have said that, when I am to be your woman so soon."

" It hurts me that you have looked at anyone, even for a moment, with pleasure." He lifted her face in his hand, brushed her lips with his: " Since the beginning, there has been no other with me, never will be until the end."

" It will be with us, as with my mother and father—until the end? "

" Until the end, yes."

They were silent.

The night wind rustled the leaves of the trees. And it was the Infidel who first thought of the phrase without which vows are void:

" If Allah wills."

CHAPTER XIV

THE following morning, Lartal roamed through the garden, pacing the tiled aisles leisurely, ascended the terrace, conversed with Tlemsani, and found impatience devouring him. He had soon tired of marble, inlaid coffers, gilt frames, fancy clocks. Even a remarkable collection of saddles, bits, and bridles failed to hold his attention long.

At last, long habit took him to the stables. The negroes in charge permitted him to enter and inspect as he pleased. The stalls surpassed in comfort the average regimental stables. In the spacious rooms above, the unmarried soldiers lived. Here it was obvious that a military man had trained the outfit. Negroes do not of their own inspiration trim a cot neatly, or hang their belongings in order. Si Khalil had not forgotten his own duties as lieutenant.

Behind the stables, enclosed between the white-washed walls and a vast vegetable garden, Lartal located a negro village. He might have believed himself transported fifteen hundred miles to the southwest. The sight of the negresses and their chubby black babies brought up memories of the Sudan.

They spoke the peculiar Berber dialect in use locally, but among themselves they employed a *patois*, in which Lartal recognised Dioula and Tukleur vocables. His own Bambara, stiff from lack of practice, nevertheless brought excited response.

A dozen women surrounded him.

"*Toubab*, white man, thou dost know Bamako?"

"I have been there, yes."

"I am a Tomas woman," said another, "born not far from Kissidugu. My father was once a soldier of the white men."

"What brought thee so far from home, *mousso?*"

"I was sold and sent to the country of the Sinking Sun (Morocco) when I was no higher than this one—" she pushed forward a boy of three or four, whose howls of fear died away in mute contemplation of Lartal's boots. "But men came to the caravan and took me here."

Messaoud appeared, fully equipped, saluted Lartal, spoke to his wife, the woman from Kissidugu.

From his attitude it seemed that he was about to leave on a long journey.

"Going forth to fetch yet another Frenchman, Messaoud?"

"No, Captain. Merely up to the city."

"And thou dost bid farewell to thy wife each time, thus?"

Messaoud scratched his thigh thoughtfully. More than one generation of constant contact with a superior race was needed to banish all racial gestures.

"Not every time, Captain. There may be blows struck up there before long. And Allah knows who will go down and who will return."

The woman wailed softly. The small boy, sensing rather than understanding his parents' preoccupation, looked away from Lartal's spurs, and howled again. Messaoud, annoyed at this domestic scene under the eyes of one he knew to be a chief, smote the child's head with a light tap.

"Hush up, Stupid!" He glanced in apology toward Lartal. "Hear, Captain—the horses are out. I must go now."

Twenty-five negroes were waiting, already in the

saddle. Their cloaks were rolled up and stowed away. Around their waists, slung from the shoulders, were bandoliers, garnished with cartridges. Cross-hilted swords, long heavy blades, were passed through the cinches, beneath the right thigh of each rider.

Among them were those who had escorted Lartal to the Cliff. They lifted their hands in greeting.

Another rider appeared in the open. In the booted trim figure, dwarfed by the brawny cavalrymen, the captain recognised Morjana. She knew how to ride, Cabassot's daughter! He had often smiled at the equestriennes of his own race. But he had to admit that she had the poise, the seat and the skill of a veteran. He tried to restrain the grin of pride, his surge of possessive admiration. He was as pleased as if he himself had taught her.

He sought her glance hopefully, craving a nod, a smile, perhaps a wave of the hand. He was angry when she guided her mount through the open door without apparently noticing him, and was immediately blanketed from sight by the broad backs of her guards. She had smiled toward Messaoud and the others, and left him standing, foolishly, with an inane smirk freezing his face.

There was consolation in the thought: Nothing had occurred since last night to change her attitude. Considering the customs of the land, the presence of a half hundred interested spectators, he could not have expected her to embrace him. Perhaps there was a rule forbidding a woman to address her future mate in public.

He cast an inquiring eye upward: About noon, judging from the sun, and no word from Si Khalil.

He returned to the Residence, where he found Tlemsani gorging. The early afternoon passed in desultory remarks, occasional anecdotes, short naps on

the convenient sofa. From time to time, a servant slapped his sandals on the pavement below, a snatch of song came from Si Khalil's apartments. Evidently the absence of the lord and master did not cause too great mourning, for often the song ended in rippling, far-carrying laughter.

Tlemsani had been back from the mid-afternoon prayer perhaps an hour when Kumbaba appeared. The black, twice beaten by Tlemsani, had acquired veneration for the Arab, as evidenced by the grave salute.

"The horses will be saddled soon," he announced. "When you please, come to the stables." On the low table near Lartal he deposited two solid swords, two knives, two loaded revolvers: "These are for you."

"Why are we given arms?" Lartal asked.

"I know not——"

"My Captain must be answered," Tlemsani said without rising.

"Si Khalil gave the order," Kumbaba said. "The messenger said there had been fighting in the city between the riders of the *jemma* and the people. Nothing much. A head or two bumped. But Si Khalil is a kind man, and doubtless does not want his guests to be uneasy for want of arms."

Tlemsani ran his palm against the blades, while Lartal broke the revolver, emptied the cartridges on the table, tested the mechanisms before reloading. He slipped one revolver into his tunic pocket, gave the other to the Arab, who concealed it in the sash-belt beneath his cloak. At the stables, the horses were ready.

"A queer dump," Lartal muttered as he swung into the saddle, "where the bridgeroom totes a revolver on the way to the ceremony."

Kumbaba introduced the leader of the escort of fifteen men, a sullen, thick-lipped brute, who brusquely split his face in an angelic grin of acknowledgment. His name was Alyoun, he stated, and no one placed in Alyoun's charge ever came to harm. The grin vanished, the lips closed like a trap. Lartal might have imagined his companion a magnificent, intelligent, sleek-skinned chimpanzee.

The captain had been trained to observe. From the moment he beheld Alyoun and his men, he felt the trouble ahead was serious. They were silent, yet their actions were eloquent. A tentative tug at a sword, a casual fingering of carbine bolts, the care with which each strap, each buckle, was examined. No great excitement, elation, such as precedes an engagement against an organised foe, merely a tenseness of spirit, a close attention to equipment, as if the soldiers were annoyed by the thought that they would soon participate in an affair where they would risk injury without credit.

"I am not content," Tlemsani informed him.

"Why not?"

"It would be shameful for either of us to fall in street fighting against city people."

"What difference does it make? Would one be more dead slain by a man who lives in a stone house than by one who lives under a tent?"

"No, Captain. But the last is proper, and the first is not." After pausing long enough for Lartal to argue this fine question of ethics, Tlemsani went on: "On that road, only fit for goats, which we must travel upon—how easy to kill our horses and thereby bring about our fall."

As the party ascended the path toward the city, two riders abreast, Lartal cast many a suspicious glance upward as, far above, a slight sound could be

heard, or a dislodged pebble trickled down the almost perpendicular slope. Far below, lost in the trees, he could see the higher terraces of the Residence, and, at intervals, the rounded roofs of native dwellings, like overturned swallows' nests. Miles away, across the lake of vegetation, tawny as the hide of a lion, the western sector of the encircling wall.

When the group emerged near the city, entered the first street, Alyoun gestured, and the negroes closed in around Lartal and his companion. In the semi-obscurity of the brief twilight, the thoroughfares appeared deserted, save for small boys and women who promptly hugged the windowless walls. From a distance came a clamour, punctuated by the discharge of firearms. Whether a riot or a celebration, it was difficult to determine.

They turned a corner and ran into a gathering jamming the street. Men, carrying heavy clubs, gesticulated, shouted, refused to part before the blacks without ascertaining the identity of those thus guarded. The leader stepped forward, grasped Alyoun's horse by the bridle, and spat his questions defiantly. The black leader, calm, solemn as a baby playing with his toes, gave his destination, the house of Si Khalil, and suggested that no further obstacles be placed in his way.

"The strangers are with thee, negro——"

"Perhaps." Alyoun, scorning to use a weapon, struck with his fist. The questioner appeared to pass through the pavement as a nail enters a plank of soft wood. Seldom had Lartal witnessed such dignified and efficacious violence.

Followed a confused mingling of horses and men, shouts, howls of pain. A second later, clubs rained, thrown from behind. A man swayed in the saddle, was braced by strong hands of those riding on either

side. In a clatter of hoofs, Lartal and his escort were engulfed beneath the gate of Si Khalil's house. The blacks dismounted, chattering jubilantly. One exhibited a broken arm.

"Si Khalil awaits there," Alyoun said. "Let him know how well we behaved, Captain."

"I will. A mighty blow, that of thine!"

"The Son of Many Fathers had a hard skull——"

Si Khalil shook hands hastily.

"Things go badly, Lartal! They all went back on me, straight down to Si Tabban, who was my best friend for years. I have talked until my throat is dry. Nothing against you personally—they all have heard by now, you are the Lartal who slew Moktar el Khiani near Timbuktu. But you are a Christian. I had believed religious prejudice pretty well abolished by years of isolation. It seems now that it is only dormant and has been resuscitated by Omar. We have it to contend with. True, I consulted the *jemma* before sending for you, pointed out at the time how well I had merged with their customs, how I had become one of them, told them you would do the same, after—you had grown to love your woman, your son. I said if I had been of use to the people, you, another Frenchman, as well fitted for command as myself—would carry on the work——"

"What changed them?"

"The news was spread this morning. I supplied sheep for the feast. The majority accepted cheerfully. The element led by Omar manifested openly, against you, against me."

"What did they find wrong with you at this late day?"

"My use of alcohol, for one thing. It leaked out that the stuff brought me by the caravans was not solely medicine—a silly argument, yet based on the

Law. Of the council, nine-tenths, when alone with me, have taken a glass or two. Si Tabban has filled his pouch with liquors more than once. Yet before one another, they all pretended to be shocked, as if it were a new discovery. A suggestion was made to have Morjana taken from me immediately, as she is Sidi Moussa's granddaughter, the only one of his blood. They're ruthless, when once launched. They'd force her to accept anyone they selected. Then she'd kill him and kill herself—if I know her."

Lartal grasped Si Khalil by the shoulder: "Where is she?"

"She's here. I told them you'd become a Mohammedan. Oh, I don't ask you to be sincere. A matter of policy."

"Agreed, agreed. What did they say to that?"

"They accepted. I gave them their choice between that and fighting." Si Khalil stretched out his gaunt hands: "They still fear me no matter how few are with me. I warned them not to give Omar time to recover. To-night, Morjana will be given to you. Come here——"

Lartal followed him to the verandah.

"You hear those yells? See those fires? Your marriage feast. I have decided not to let you appear in a public place for the ceremony. It would be Satan's own work if two *spahis* couldn't pull themselves out of any scrape!"

He led Lartal into a room where the delegates of the council were gathered. A *taleb*, a scantily bearded and important scribe, drew up the marriage contract under Si Tabban's dictation, aligning the Arabic characters swiftly, with beautiful flourishes, upon thick parchment. Si Khalil acknowledged receipt of the dot agreed upon, enumerated with utter seriousness the number of fine she-camels which

the captain was presumed to have given for Morjana.

"Sign, Lartal——"

He was annoyed to find his fingers trembling slightly as he wrote his name in the language employed for the text of the important manuscript. The First Sura of the Koran was read aloud, thus sanctifying the union of Paul Lartal to Morjana, daughter of Si Khalil, granddaughter of Sidi Moussa.

"The essential is accomplished," Si Khalil informed his new son-in-law, in French. "I'd like to split a cold bottle with you to celebrate. After what occurred this morning, I don't believe it would be wise! Brace yourself, now—for the old fools will not miss an opportunity to wag their chins——"

The stiff formality of the meeting relaxed. Orators were eager to be heard. Lartal was reminded of village marriages in France, following which everyone, from mayor to road-sweeper, was entitled to his speech. The captain was submitted to a very frank discussion of his bride's physical perfections, congratulated upon his rare good luck.

Si Tabban made an elegant address, illustrated with sweeping gestures, in which unrolled fabulous comparisons, stars in a shroud of night, the whiteness of snow atop the Atlas, the graceful spring of the gazelle, the strength of the lion.

"Many years ago," he said in conclusion, "when the Kel-Rhela Tuareg desired a worthy successor to the noble Gueman, they selected one who was a stranger, El Hadj Ahmed, not merely because of his great piety and superb courage. He came to lead them, having no interest in local quarrels—and proved just. These others, that are clamouring elsewhere, let it be said to them as it is written in the Koran: 'Whoso embraces Islam, they earnestly seek the truth.'"

He gravely kissed Lartal's shoulder, the captain instantly pressed his own nose against the old man's cloak in return. Lartal touched many hands outstretched toward him. If these venerable old fellows were merely hypocrites, they were sublime actors. He was not far from considering himself the host; the house his property. Solemnly he returned compliments, until a brusque realisation of his behaviour made him smile.

"Is this all?" he asked of Si Khalil.

"No. Had things gone smoothly, we would have had a public celebration, hundreds of men riding in your honour. As it is, this will prove almost a poor man's wedding. A dinner will be served here, which you cannot very well fail to attend. I have, moreover, invited a bunch of young men to kick up a bit of fuss in the front yard. We'll go down and watch them awhile."

Great fires had been lighted to illuminate the open space. Against the walls were crowded many people, among them the black soldiers, whose sooty faces protruded like ink spots on a white cloth. The shrill shouts denoted the presence of women. Thirty-odd mounted men, aligned at the far end, greeted the appearance of Si Khalil and Lartal with cheers.

Upon a signal, they came galloping forward, screaming, in an avalanche of horses and men. For the occasion, modern smokeless-powder rifles had been discarded for old-fashioned flintlock, better suited to a spectacular display. The long barrels filled with loose powder flared high in glowing sulphurous streaks, coughing detonations cracked, as hoofs struck sheaves of sparks from stones. The crowd applauded.

To Lartal, who had beheld the real *fantasia* at native weddings in the north, the sole new

thrill he found was the fact that he was guest of honour.

"You've seen better, eh?" Si Khalil murmured.

"Often," then, however, he was forced to add, "Ah, that's better!"

One of the riders, erect and confident in the saddle, copper face framed in white cloth, teeth agleam, leaped a magnificent white horse over the largest fire, in a graceful surge, dashed down the length of the open space, back again, then suddenly whirled and raced straight toward the bridegroom.

Lartal was deafened by the discharge of a rifle near his ears. Flying hoofs clubbed the air inches from his face. Knowing the purpose of this display, to test his nerves, he stood his ground, managed to keep an unwavering smile. One by one, the riders imitated the first. When the last had howled and fired, Lartal turned to Si Khalil.

"I sweated ice for awhile!"

"You kept a good front, that's the important thing."

"Charming, Cabassot.—Yet I feel the need of a long stretch of quiet after to-night."

"You'll have it. We have a custom identical to that of the northern Tuareg. The bride and the husband are isolated from others for seven days and seven nights. If you are too alarmed at the prospect, I can add that so long as you are not seen in public, you can stroll out for a chat with me occasionally."

"Where will I—where will we, to be correct—stay?"

"In a room of this house. I rather suppose the idea is if you can look at each other for seven days without quarrelling or feeling sorry for yourselves, the wedding's a success and can last for life."

"How much longer will this tomfoolery last?" Lartal indicated the riders, who executed difficult evolutions with undiminished ardour, picking up scarfs from the ground at a gallop, juggling with heavy flintlocks.

"Until we leave. I'll signal for that."

The blacks also wished to give evidence of their ability. What they lacked in verve and dash they made up in genuine efficiency. Piloted by Messaoud, they went through the cavalry drill, engaged in a sham battle during which a few gashes were given and received. Si Khalil ended the performance by clapping his hands.

The banquet, served in the reception room, was attended only by men. Following the usual ablutions recommended by the Book, the courses filed endlessly. Pastries fried in oil, roast chickens with mint dressing—evidently the Mountain People did not share the Tuareg's abhorrence of poultry—lambs, roasted whole, emanating a vapour sufficient to awake the most jaded appetite. The captain was satiated early, but Tlemsani, some distance away, allowed nothing to go by untouched, neither stewed vegetables, fresh fruits, not sugary cakes. From time to time his gaunt head would tilt back at the end of his neck like a metal knob too heavy for a reed cane, as he gulped down various liquids. He did not forget to belch at frequent intervals, as politeness ordered.

A heady scent of musk lifted from the perfume burners, mingled with the odours of food, the fainter odours of perfumed water brought to cleanse the hands. Lartal was confused by the babbling of many tongues. On his left Si Khalil was engaged in a fierce argument. Hours passed. Several of the guests sank to the carpets, slept, knees high, head

nestled in the crook of the arm, to awake presently, stare about sleepily and resume eating.

Si Tabban leaned over and whispered into Lartal's ear. The captain, not understanding, referred him to Si Khalil, who listened and laughed.

"The old nut has quite forgotten the purpose of this gathering. He believes himself, I do think, at one of the dinners closing the fast of Ramadan."

"What does he want?"

"Dancers."

Si Khalil signalled one of the blacks.

Before long, Si Tabban was contemplating a shapely gold-spangled girl, who went unsmilingly through the usual contortions. Her cheeks were a gorgeous, unreal crimson, increasing the first impression given of an animated pagan idol. Only when her lips parted to reveal her teeth, when her wide nostrils quivered was Lartal conscious that she was not an automaton. He soon found himself nodding his head in time to the rhythmic pattering of the small bright-nailed feet. As he glanced up into her expressionless eyes he imagined he could see, reflected as upon sombre mirrors, the flaring lights, the gaudy carpets and the mass of white cloaks huddled before her. The orchestra, hurriedly improvised, was not, Si Khalil assured, up to the standard. Neither were the dancers. Later, after Lartal had in reality become one of them, he would indeed see dancers——

"And Sidi Moussa? Would he approve of this?"

"He!" Si Khalil slapped Lartal's back: "You should have known him! There was one who understood life! Not back there, at Makbara, but after his task was completed. Three days before he died, in this very room, he awoke from the sort of living death that had submerged him. Khadijah had

discovered a peerless dancer in one of the young servants. Sidi Moussa, who had not spoken anything save mumbling words for months, said, very clearly : ' She is beautiful. Praise Allah ! ' "

A negress followed, not more than sixteen years of age. She duplicated the preceding dance with comical exaggeration. At first, her skin was dead black, then, as the ardour of her exhibition increased, her body became lustrous with perspiration. She smiled, showing her strong even teeth, a row of ivory in a casket of crimson.

" Faster—faster ! " Si Khalil urged.

The negress fled and was succeeded by another.

Lartal took advantage of the brief transition to nudge Si Khalil.

" Where's Morjana ? "

" With her women. Waiting for your representative to call her. Don't offend Si Tabban by breaking up the show."

At length the diners split into several groups. But Lartal could see the celebration was drawing to a close. The black servants took away the cushions and rugs. Si Tabban, hands holding his beard, stared unseeingly at the ceiling, rocking back and forth, chanting, in a thin piping voice, a melody of his own composition.

" No wonder the Koran forbids the drinking of wine," Lartal commented. " The Faithful don't need it."

" Did you drink any milk ? " Si Khalil asked.

" No. Why ? "

" I had the blacks put some stuff in it. Strong—distilled by the Jews around Tafilalet. Blends with the milk wonderfully, passed down like a letter in a mail box. A little joke—" Si Khalil chuckled sleepily : " Mailbox-letter.—Speaking to you, words

come back more and more. Had almost forgotten that old expression."

"If that's the case I'd better get Tlemsani away. He'll have something to do later, if I recall rightly."

"He and the others could do it with their eyes shut. Merely ride around the house, enter by another gate, get Morjana and bring her to you. No use waiting for the others to go, they're anchored here. Tlemsani! Tlemsani!" Si Khalil addressed the Arab: "Thy friend, the Captain at my side, has honoured thee. Thou dost know? Good. Below, all prepared is the she-camel with its enclosed saddle for my daughter. Gather those others—thou dost see, that one, that one—four or five. Mount, bring my daughter through this gate, take her to the room indicated by the women. Then come back here and inform Captain Lartal."

"Why can't she come through the building?" Lartal asked.

"You were not presumed to live under the same roof before marriage. She must be brought to your house. One must observe conventions. I seem to remember even in France it isn't proper to be under the same roof before marriage. Appearances—appearances."

Tlemsani had already left, followed by several of the younger men. Others rose, took ceremonious leave of Si Khalil and Lartal. Gradually the room emptied. In the growing silence, the voices seemed strangely clear, loud. Below, impatient calls for the servants rang out, the beat of many hoofs. The captain tried to distinguish the sound of Tlemsani's return from the uproar caused by the departing guests.

They were almost alone when the Arab appeared.

"Is the bride in her husband's house?" Si Khalil asked.

Tlemsani glanced at Lartal uneasily before answering.

"She was gone when we reached her house, Si Khalil."

"Gone! Gone where?"

"I don't know. Yet, I cannot believe she went freely—the negroes were killed."

CHAPTER XV

IMMENSE, arms outstretched, Kumbaba lay upon the tiling. Life had seeped through a small hole beneath the heart.

Kumbaba, the good-natured fellow, the clown, he who had been brought in by Tlemsani to the camp, who but this morning was cheerful and grinning! Dead—it was an evil omen. Who might die, who might live, before the end of the night?

Ten steps farther, another bloody carcase. It was obvious that the two had been taken by surprise, while conversing with men they believed friends.

Gradually, there seeped into Lartal the realisation that Morjana had been taken away, Morjana was gone.—His sense of loss brought a strange depression, a sagging of the spirit. He was crushed, empty-headed. He was helpless, forced to depend upon others for initiative. This feeling, after years of independent command, increased his distress. Go down to the yard, mount and ride—that was easy. But go where? Against whom? Omar, of course. Where was he?

A woman emerged into the light, dishevelled, face battered, Morjana's servant, a fat, slow-footed creature of thirty-eight or forty. She rocked from the hips, moaned, scratched at her face in evidence of mourning. She saw Si Khalil, ran forward and fell on her knees before him:

"*Sidna*, Excellency, she's gone—she's gone—they took her away!"

Si Khalil drew her erect violently: "Stop howling. Who?"

Instead of replying, the woman escaped the old man's grasp, darted toward Lartal, finger-nails high. She clawed at his cheeks, while he tried to hold her wrists, to protect his eyes.

"Dog, Christian! All this evil is thine! The Book forbids our women to wed Infidels. Christian!"

Her strength was tremendous, unexpected. Unable to reach the captain's face she tried to bite his wrists. Si Khalil, less inclined to leniency, brought the scene to a close with his still vigorous fist against her jaw. This proved a salutary example for the other women, whose howling ended abruptly.

"Who saw the bandits?" Si Khalil asked.

"All of us. We were awaiting——"

"Who were they? I wish to know nothing else."

"There was Omar, the Saint. He was in the lead. The other.—Master, we dare not speak——"

"You will speak!" Si Khalil invited.

"Forgive us, Master. He was thy son."

"Yusuf?"

"It was he who spoke to the blacks first. Then others rushed in. He stabbed Kumbaba."

"Was Morjana hurt?"

"We do not know——"

"The little swine! I'll flay him alive for this!"

The yard swarmed with negroes, already mounted.

"Good work, Messaoud," Si Khalil approved.

The gate was opened, and the party galloped through. In the streets the remaining passers-by ran for shelter.

A moonlit square, studded with regularly spaced heaps of embers—here one of the feasts had been in progress. A native hurled a stone toward the group, was dropped immediately, hacked by those riding in the rear. The negroes had been in a bad mood, ready for trouble. Now they were unleashed.

Dark as a tunnel, a narrow street opened up, descending in a series of steps toward the Lower City. Without hesitation, Si Khalil entered at a reckless pace. Behind, horses fell, men shouted. Five hundred yards of gullies between walls, and another open spot, a great quadrangle, closed in by two-story buildings. Pistol and carbine shots scattered the straggling natives. In an instant the place was licked bare of men, as a stretch of stubble by fire.

"El Hadj Omar lives there, that's where he established his school." Si Khalil indicated one of the structures, more imposing than the others. "This has all been planned—the outer walls are loopholed."

A rifle cracked, a dart of flame spat from one of the apertures, as if to prove the old Frenchman's words. Lartal turned, counted the negroes, twenty-three. No matter how weak the garrison of the improvised blockhouse, they could hold out against twenty-five men. Within was Morjana—Lartal turned a torn, haggard face toward Si Khalil.

"No use," Si Khalil grumbled. He ordered his men to dismount. The horses were led out of range, tied. "We'll have to wait until the *jemma's* representatives are here. If their diplomacy fails to make Omar give up my daughter, they'll let me have a battalion or so of militia. He's not too sure of himself, for here we are, exposed, and nothing more than a warning shot came. He'll temporise if given a chance."

"You know what he'll ask," Lartal protested.

"My daughter. Yet the contract has been signed. She's your woman. Right or wrong, that's the law." Si Khalil lighted a cigar, laid his hand upon Lartal: "Try to be calm. Trust me. She has not

been harmed. He would not dare, until he has exhausted every other means. We must gain time to think."

"Do you know the buildings around here?"

"Yes."

"Get a lantern."

They walked back to the nearest house, forced the door, and took a lamp from a deserted room. Lartal drew out an envelope, a pencil stub.

"Sketch the plan of the house and yards, what sort of stuff the walls are made of in various places. We can leave a skirmish line to hold their attention, hack through, and get into the house."

"Even with the blacks not yet here, I dispose of fifty men. They'll count what's in front of them, guess what we're doing. I'll have picks brought, however, in case we have a chance to use them."

"I must do something," Lartal muttered.

"I understand," Si Khalil said gently. "This is an unholy end for a wedding day. Wait—I'll try to speak to them. Yusuf won't allow them to shoot his father." Si Khalil stepped forward resolutely: "It is I, ready to be slain by my unworthy son."

"Be off," someone replied. "Thou hast given thy daughter to one of those who act unjustly, one of those who must attribute companions unto God. By Allah, art thou indeed a father?"

"Free my daughter and no harm will be done thee."

"We are not of those who, after tasting the mercy of Allah, associate other deities with their Lord."

Si Khalil returned slowly.

"El Hadj Omar is quoting the Koran. No sense trying to argue. Here comes Si Tabban, with some of the others. I will inform them of how the sanctity

of my home has been violated." To Si Tabban, Si Khalil concluded: "They have slain two of my servants, and, unless they submit to my demands without delay, I claim the right to avenge them, I wish the blood debt to be paid."

"Against thy son, also."

"No. Yet he shall be punished."

"I am known to be thy friend," Si Tabban said doubtfully. "It is best for another to speak."

After a long debate, an emissary was selected, shuffled forward, bent over, more by the fear of bullets than the weight of years.

"El Hadj Omar!" he called. "Dost thou hear me?"

"I hear thee, most respected, venerable Bu Brahim."

"Thou hast violated the home of Si Khalil, stolen his daughter. This, we cannot permit. The laws of the *jemma* must be obeyed. Thou shouldst have brought thy claim before us to be discussed and decided."

"You were blinded by the sorcery of the Christians. We, who saw the light, acted."

"You acted wrongly. Si Khalil is kind, forgiving. Give back his daughter, and peace will come."

"A devil within thee now speaks, respected Bu Brahim," Omar cried, ironically. "We have not gone so far to halt now. The daughter of Si Khalil is mine."

"She is the wife of another man."

"The concubine, thou dost mean. A Christian cannot wed a true Believer."

"I have spoken. There will be fighting if need be. Beware of your heads. You are but few, and all the warriors will obey us."

Omar's laugh reached Lartal.

"Hear me, all! The warriors will die for 'everybody's woman.' It is written: 'Ye are allowed to marry free women—when ye shall have assigned them their dower—living chastely with them, neither committing sin, nor taking them for concubines.' The stranger has not obeyed."

"Thou dost quote the Book, separating the words, adding them together, changing their meaning?" Bu Brahim protested weakly.

"Each word is inspired by Allah and equally sacred with the whole. *I* have not learned the Book from Christians! Let the *jemma* call upon the warriors to die for one who is 'everybody's woman.' Did not the dog spend the whole of last night with her upon the terrace of the house in the gardens?"

"Is that the truth?" Bu Brahim asked.

"Yusuf, son of Si Khalil, brother of the shameless woman, will swear by Allah it is the truth."

The envoy of the *jemma* was silenced, tottering uncertainly, alone in the open twenty feet before the door.

"Is that the truth, Lartal?" Si Khalil whispered.

"Partly. I did meet Morjana on the terrace."

"Idiot! She—even more than you——"

"I saw no one."

"You were probably watched by fifty. Her women, my wives, their servants—and Yusuf——"

"Didn't seem to be any harm."

"I should have warned you——"

"I give you my word of honour——"

"I believe you. Who else will? The *jemma?* A bunch of silly old fools who trust nobody, not even themselves. The people? They're half primitive. I'll have to meet the situation, gain time someway. Now that the *jemma* has the case in hands, we are bound by law to wait for its decision."

" Bu Brahim's standing there like a fool."

Si Khalil stepped forward and joined Bu Brahim, addressed Omar : " Thou, who dost have the Koran forever on thy lips, hearest thou this : ' Ye are forbidden also to take to wife the women who are married, except those women whom your right hands shall possess as slaves.' Thou dost claim to be a Holy Man. A single sin will end thy reputation for piety. I am willing to leave the ultimate decision in the hands of the respected council. Bide until the *jemma* has decided."

" Si Khalil speaks rightly," Bu Brahim approved.

" I shall wait, then," Omar agreed.

The members of the council grouped about Si Khalil.

" Thou hast particular interest in the question," Si Tabban spoke : " It would not be seemly to be seen seated among us, influencing us. Best, then, that thou remain away, so that men will not say we favoured thee."

" If you are just, you, who consented to give my daughter to this man, will decide for him. That alone would be equitable."

" Hear him ! Already he doubts our decision."

" Yes, yes," others chimed in. " We must weigh the question, decide freely. It would have been best, Si Khalil, had thy friend been of our Faith long ago."

" We order a truce," Si Tabban cried out, loud enough to be heard by Omar. " It will last until two hours after sunrise."

" We accept the truce," El Hadj Omar shouted.

" Thou also, Si Khalil ? " Si Tabban queried.

" I accept."

The delegation from the council left. Si Khalil and his men drew away into the darkness.

"We're not certain to win out in the debate," Lartal said.

"We're certain to lose. Their decision is already arrived at. They see luck against us, realise my prestige has been wiped out by this open defiance of my power. They will annul the contract, abandon Morjana to Omar. After that, he can use his clever tongue to persuade them he had been mistaken. No one will contradict him, for who should have better knowledge. Married to Morjana, Sidi Moussa's blood will retain him above all others."

"You intend to wait, to allow things to go thus! My God, has the last trace of French vanished from you?" He grasped Si Khalil by the shoulder: "You damned, cowardly old pig!"

"Let me go, Lartal——"

"You shall hear what I have to say. Your Negroes have more pride than you. Let me speak to Messaoud, to Alyoun, they'll risk their necks for Morjana. I suppose you love the idea of that swarthy *bico's* paws on your child?"

"Take it easy, young fellow. You're not a wet chicken, anyway. Who said I'd let the matter pass quietly? I have gained not only time but security."

"You'll break the truce?"

"Yes. Necessity knows no law. We'll withdraw, as if returning to my house, for we may be watched, then cut across the yards to the back of the house."

"Good. And we can laugh at the *jemma* in the morning."

"From a distance. As soon as we have Morjana we'll make for the outside."

"You'll have to leave, abandon everything?"

"Do you think they'll make me Emperor for thumbing my nose at their instructions?"

The blacks followed their white chiefs to the nearest open square, formed a circle around the Master. They were joined by their comrades from the house who had been sent after the picks.

"Those of you who wish to go back can do so," Si Khalil informed them, in a low voice. "There is no shame, for they who remain near me will be enemies of the *jemma*, and perhaps will not be permitted again, even if they live, to go down to the gardens where the women and children are. I swear, by Allah, that those who leave shall never be punished, should I become powerful once more."

Lartal looked anxiously into the black faces. He knew the strong attachment of the Sudanese negro for his family. If one took the lead, he and Si Khalil would soon be alone. The silence lengthened, no answer came, yet no one moved. Then the captain noticed that Messaoud was grinning. Alyoun literally shook with laughter.

"Good lads," Si Khalil approved. "The food you ate was not wasted. You are men. Now, one will go back and have fresh horses made ready for us when we return to the house." He named the negro trusted with the mission. "The rest will come with the captain and me. Make no more noise than is necessary. We shall have to demolish brick walls with the picks. Receive the bricks in your clothing, lay them gently on the ground."

"We will do so."

"I have one more thing to say," Si Khalil hesitated. "There will be fighting. Yusuf, whom you all know, is among our enemies. His life is yours, for he killed Kumbaba. Yet, I ask you to spare him if Allah wills."

"He is thy son," Messaoud replied. "We remember."

The buildings near the structure where El Hadj Omar and his disciples had taken refuge were chiefly warehouses. Looting was unknown in the city, for there was no possibility of concealing stolen goods, nor escape for the thief. The immense stores were guarded by old fellows, who, like night-watchmen the world over, were not over alert in the still hours.

A querulous, white-bearded old guard appeared. Seeing Si Khalil, he offered no protest. Without quite knowing what His Excellency was about, he piloted the armed blacks and the two white men through the maze of aisles, until they reached the house, the rear wall of which faced on the open space behind the improvised fortress.

The sun-dried bricks and mortar crumbled under pick and crow-bar. Si Khalil directed the work with short, precise words. For years he had held his own against growing ill-will, yet he had ever been prepared for such a climax. At intervals activity was suspended while everyone listened for a sound from the other side. Swiftly the hole grew in size, until Messaoud was able to push his arm through and feel space on the opposite side of the wall. The grassy smell of the gardens invaded the dry, dusty air of the chamber.

Si Khalil questioned the old man at his side.

"Where is the door leading upstairs, in relation to this spot?"

When the information was given him, the men continued with their work. The hole was enlarged and they passed into the garden, massed together in the thick shadow of the building they had just left. By keeping close to the line of trees and bushes, they might hope to escape detection even in the bright moonlight.

"They're not so foolish as not to have placed a guard on this side," Si Khalil said. "Probably, before we go far, the alarm will be given."

Half-way across the gardens, Si Khalil halted. Lartal heard stealthy footsteps.

Then someone spoke, very near: "No need to worry about the sentry."

Lartal had last seen Tlemsani during the conversation between Bu Brahim and Omar. He had not been aware of the Arab's disappearance.

"No need for all the men to follow," Tlemsani went on. "The less we are, the less sound we will make. There are but sixteen within, the others watching the open place. Omar has retired into a room to pray at ease."

"And my daughter?" Si Khalil asked.

"She is alone. Thy son was with her but she sent him away——"

The lower part of the building was dark. Tlemsani piloted them through the vast halls, up a steep stairway.

A faint light illuminated a wide passage, opening on the garden. The wall opposite was lined with doors, but three of the dozen copper oil-lamps hanging by slender metal chains from the high ceiling were burning. A man lay against the wall, huddled, as if asleep. Tlemsani, naked save for a lion-cloth, exhibited a fist armed with a curving blade. Then he indicated a door. Lartal lifted the stout iron bars that closed it on the outside.

Morjana was within, alone.

She wore the costume of a native bride. Her women had painted her cheeks with a sort of opaque rouge, added a beauty spot of dark blue to the chin, wrapped her hair in a transparent gauze, sparkling with gold embroideries. Over a robe of white wool

was another of blue silk. She was glittering with heavy gold collar, bracelets and chains. Long ear-rings hung like golden tears against the crimson flush.

She revealed no surprise. It was obvious to her that her father and her husband should be there.

CHAPTER XVI

In the yard of Si Khalil's mansion, the men waited beside their horses. Si Khalil cursed in French, paced back and forth jerkily.

Morjana had gone upstairs to change her garments. Tlemsani was dressed once more like a *Mehariste.*

He explained to Lartal:

"I went through with you to the yards, yes, only I did not wait for you to dig through the last wall. I climbed it and descended on the other side by using my turban and my cloak as a rope. These people, they have forgotten the tricks their fathers knew. The men about El Hadj Omar are not warriors in truth, but youths such as Yusuf. To find the guard left in the garden was easy. And that other before the door.—Yes, truly Omar should have selected at least one wise warrior to advise him. I talked through the door to thy woman. Omar had told her he would await the decision of the *jemma,* and had gone down below, to be locked into a room by his followers until morning, there to pray. I think, Captain, he was thus trying to win her love. Such men believe women are won by gentleness——"

"Why didst thou not free her then?"

"It was thy work."

Morjana came out, followed by several women, who wept softly. She who had accused Lartal of bringing evil luck upon the household, moaned like a wounded animal. Morjana joined in her demands to be taken along. But repeated attempts to find a horse willing to bear the poundage of the frightened matron soon convinced Morjana, and the nurse was

left, tearing at her cheeks with her nails and uttering tremulous sobs.

"Stupid rules made by conceited fools sometimes work out for the best," Si Khalil told Lartal, as they left the walls of the city behind. "The *jemma* is gathered in a room near the principal mosque, at the foot of Sidi Moussa's tower. It is forbidden, under any circumstance, for an outsider to disturb the council during its august deliberations. We have been seen by many, someone will warn Omar, but the *jemma* will not hear of it. Their dignity is at stake. They said two hours after sunrise, two hours after sunrise it will be."

"Omar will pursue us."

"No one is allowed out of the city after dark. But I am military commander, responsible for the safety of the Pass, and permitted to come and go as I please. More than once I have paid surprise visits to the outposts. The warriors have not heard of Morjana's capture by Omar, which occurred after midnight, the time of the last change of posts. I have also given them sheep and other food. They're sluggish, in the throes of digestion!" Si Khalil suddenly addressed his daughter: "Stop crying, you little fool!"

"I'll never come back, father, I know I'll never come back."

"Lartal, can you believe that two months ago she was begging me to take her into Morocco, Algeria, anywhere? She's never satisfied."

"It's hard to leave everything one has known——"

"Humour her now if you wish. She's on your hands."

At the military camp, Si Khalil halted long enough to give orders in a metallic, confident voice.

"I shall come back before sunset to-morrow. I

expect then to halt here long enough to inspect the new recruits. Have you heard of the recent disturbances in the city ? "

" We have not."

" El Hadj Omar again. That man is never still."

" Oh—" the soldier said, with a short laugh, " a stroke of steel on the nape of the neck is very good for discontents." He saw Lartal and Morjana : " Greetings to thee, whose eyes are stars. To thee, also, Christian. Si Khalil, the bridge is in place."

The planking rumbled under foot. It was not long before the nude plain opened before them.

At dawn, they reached the grassy valleys at the top of the Pass. And, with the light, a muffled rumbling began, coming swiftly nearer.

" The tom-toms. They are signalling to halt us," Si Khalil said. " That is the alarm they are sounding now. The men here will be puzzled. It is the first time an alarm comes from the city to the Pass."

The commander of the next post saluted Si Khalil, and asked for information concerning the meaning of the beats.

" A few armed men have been seen in the west. The timid fellows think there will be another Moroccan attack, and warn you to look out for troops on this side."

" They know little," the native officer declared. " It would take fifteen days to circle the mountains from west to east."

To Ahmed, who greeted him with respect, Si Khalil told the truth. The caravan leader interrupted him once to give orders. His men were soon at work, the tents were taken down, a furious activity prevailed.

" It was to be expected," Ahmed said. " I knew they would not greet the Captain well in the City. It

is wrong to marry an Infidel. Had my advice been asked——"

"In the past, when many sought thy head," Si Khalil reminded him, "I asked no questions, granted thee shelter."

"My men are already busy," Ahmed pointed out placidly. "So thou dost know my gratitude. The elders of the council will be angry with me for saving thee, and I had best abandon thought of return. My family, wives, sons, belongings, come with me. I have been prosperous here, yet I felt it time to move on. I shall be prosperous elsewhere, if Allah wills."

The military commander of the Pass, Makluf, arrived to investigate the extraordinary excitement within Ahmed's camp.

"I am sending Ahmed out to escort the Captain."

"With his family?" Makluf smiled. "And thou? Thy daughter?"

"We go down to the Pass, to return soon."

"Yes, yes—" Makluf mused. "To return soon. That is well. It will please thee to know, Si Khalil, that the men on guard within the Pass are all from the Gardens. I do believe, even should I give them orders to halt thee, they would not obey." He held up one hand to call attention: "Listen—the alarm is spreading. An ill-chosen time to go down below, when we are warned of an enemy's approach."

Makluf wished to make them understand he was not deceived, and at the same time preserve sufficient pretence to be able to claim ignorance when he was asked for an explanation. Retaining his casual attitude, Makluf supplied Ahmed with additional camels, ordered squads of his men to fill the water skins, did much to speed up the departure.

"Come aside a moment, Lartal," Si Khalil said.

Then when they were away from Morjana : " Ahmed will be ready to start soon. If he is the man I take him to be he will conduct you and my daughter safely to Tabelkala."

" And you——? "

" I'll stay here and try to delay pursuit. I wish to spare myself a scene with Morjana. We'll tell her I'll join you before long. I can guarantee you a day's start, at least."

" I know your ability, Cabassot, and the bravery of the blacks. But you're outnumbered."

" I have a good chance. You have just seen Makluf. You recall the other officers we have met. I'll chance a civil war, create a party against Omar. I cannot go back with you. I don't want to inflict you with a murder trial for a wedding present. I speak thus, believing you love my kid enough to marry her—our way. You'll have a hard time, even without me. She's part native."

" No one is shocked now at the union of a Frenchman with a Berber. She's as white as I am. A good deal whiter. And anyhow, why do you think you'll be tried for murder ? Don't you know you've been safe from the law—for more than twenty years ? "

" What do you mean ? "

" A man guilty of any crime is safe from the law if he escapes capture and conviction ten years."

" Are you sure ? "

" Positive. It's in the criminal code, article six hundred and something. Those who would have insisted on your conviction are either dead or so old it amounts to the same thing."

" Twenty years ago, I might have come back ? "

" Yes——"

Cabassot's eyes moistened. He lifted his shoulders as if to shake off a heavy burden :

" I won't be sorry to see home again." he said.

He hesitated a few moments longer. Then he called :

" Messaoud ! "

The blacks were assembled. He informed them that he was leaving. To take them along was impossible. He did not have fast camels, nor could he take along enough water to supply them. They must return to their families. Relieved of their allegiance to him, they would be safe from reprisals. The council would be glad to incorporate them into the army, as had been suggested often. Morjana, already shaken by Kumbaba's death, wept. Si Khalil broke off in the middle of a sentence, grasped the outstretched hands of the negroes. They did not question their master's last decision, again proving their discipline.

" Quite like Napoleon's farewell at Fontainebleau," Lartal said, trying to bring a smile to Cabassot's lips. " Cheer up, there may be a return from Elba."

" No, I'll never come back."

" You left France without hope of return, and here you are."

" I was younger then——"

Upon Si Khalil's advice, the blacks mounted and rode away, to avoid being compromised further. Before disappearing from view, they drew up in good order, discharged their carbines into the air in a last salute.

Ahmed indicated the long file of camels already moving toward the Pass, pointed out the animals used by the two Frenchmen and Morjana.

" All is ready," he said.

Lartal settled Morjana comfortably in the saddle, inspected the fastenings. She touched his hand and whispered :

"I am content."

"You're a pair of fools," Si Khalil remarked amiably. His spirits seemed to rise. He turned in the saddle, kissed his fingers in the direction of the city: "The dynasty of Sidi Moussa bids thee farewell!"

.

Four days before, Lartal had entered the Pass eagerly. In a sort of stupor he now descended the steep narrow gorge, dazed less by what he had seen than by the great change that had taken place in his life.

It was difficult to surmise just how the Arab Bureau would accept his casual disobedience of written orders. He had seen Omar, could report on his activities, yet his encounter with the Senussi emissary had not particularly upheld the prestige of the French. His account of what existed in the Iron Mountain would prove of interest. But he could be blamed for having missed a splendid opportunity to gain for his country the friendship of an important people.

His private income permitted him comfort only when joined to his officer's pay. If dismissed from the army, or resigned, he would be forced to seek an occupation in France. A new career is not started in a month or even a year. She would be out of place, miserable, as the legal spouse of a struggling employee. A confined life, utter domestication,—Lartal doubted if he was improving her lot by taking her away.

He glanced toward her, and even as she returned his smile, he was puzzled. For he knew little of her. She was beautiful, she was witty, but what of her temper, her character? Spoiled by her odd father's kindness, accustomed to being obeyed,

there was undoubtedly an imperious streak in her make-up.

He tried now to understand in exactly what manner he had been caught in the relentless cogs of marriage. He had no clear recollection of the precise time his first sophisticated passion had deepened into a protective affection, into love. Nothing had been said out of the usual on the terrace, yet he had ascended the stairs a free man, had come down a prospective husband. Were a few kisses sufficient to effect the transformation? As Vasil would have said, that would depend on the kisses. First, she had gripped his senses unexpectedly. And then he had stepped out boldly, sunk so deep he could not extricate himself. Lacked even the desire to be free!

The proposition of a Mohammedan marriage had been made by Si Khalil. But the transforming of a native ceremony to the sacred rites of the church, and the legal procedure, that had been his own thought, even before Si Khalil had spoken.

"Bah," he muttered, "there'll be enough volunteers to take my place after they see her."

Unwisely, he thought of Brangin, tried to picture himself wishing the pair the best of luck.

"Are you ill?" Si Khalil called out.

"No—thinking."

Give her up? How easy that would prove, when the mere thought of it sickened him.

"I was a fool," Si Khalil said suddenly.

"Why?"

"Not to select just a few of the Arabs for escort, and leave the rest behind. Burdened with Ahmed's baggage, with twenty-odd women and a bunch of children, how far will we get before we're overtaken?"

"So you think they'll pursue us into the plateau below."

"Morjana is of Sidi Moussa's blood. Even were Omar willing to give her up, the council would insist upon pursuit. They have forgotten the tolerance taught by Moussa, yet cling to an outward veneration to blind the ignorant mob."

"We cannot alter things now," Lartal said, philosophically. "One consolation—Ahmed and his men will fight."

The long caravan wound slowly between the high walls of reddish stone. Sentries, perched high above, hailed Si Khalil cordially, exchanged the usual insults with the camel drivers. The presence of women and children among the departing group aroused speculation, amusement.

Once in the open, the chance of escape would be increased. Makluf had deliberately weeded out the weak camels, so that even the pack animals were able to keep up a fast pace.

Why did Morjana's safety seem primordial? Lartal had always been sceptical regarding romantic tales, but had dimly understood in just what manner a woman became worth the lives of many men. Yet here were: Si Khalil, Ahmed, Tlemsani, thirty or forty warriors, women and children, all risking annihilation to keep her from being yoked with a man not of her choosing. Not forgetting himself.

A ludicrous pseudo-mournful ballad sung in the music-halls of France during his last leave, came to him:

"Ah, c'que ça vous fait faire——
L'amour—l'amour——"

There rose the vision of the painted, slim-legged

singer repeating the words, prancing across the small stage; the red, perspiring faces of soldiers scattered in the crowd around the marble-topped tables, blooming like tulips among the pasty faces of civilians. Saucers piled high, foam-crowned glasses of beer, multi-coloured bottles, and the chorus picking up vehemently.

"*Ah, c'est extraordinaire—l'amour—l'amour——*"

Aboard the ship crossing the Mediterranean, a phonograph had squealed the same song. In the cafés of Algiers, other singers, with thicker paint, and thicker legs, had coaxed other audiences to sing: "Ah, what it makes you do—Love—love—Ah, it is extraordinary—Love—love——"

Normal, but always extraordinary, Lartal admitted. Looking about him, he felt less foolish for he saw other men, Ahmed with the encumbrance of wives and children, Si Khalil who had risked everything for Khadijah. Even the matter-of-fact Tlemsani had confessed to having risked his head on occasion for the kiss of a woman——

A last turn, and the open appeared, framed by the flanks of the Pass. Lartal's eyes had become accustomed to green plants and trees, and he was startled by the nakedness before him, as if he had forgotten the existence of the desert in which the Iron Mountain was lost like a small island in a vast sea. This was the first step out of the dream into stark reality: Fourteen days of hard travel still separated him from the nearest French Post, Tabelkala.

"I have not been down this far in thirty years," Si Khalil announced.

"And I only once in my life," Morjana called out. "And at night——"

"After we first reached here," Si Khalil went on, "Khadijah and I rode out once or twice. Then one day we were almost caught by strangers, and stopped. Anywhere else in the world, I suppose, there would have come a change in that time. Here—it might have been yesterday—I swear I recall those pebbles—no living thing has touched them—"

Ahmed cut short the old fellow's reminiscences.

"We must not linger, Si Khalil."

"True—I had almost forgotten."

The Arab leader shouted orders, the procession was reorganised, men scattered at either side, and the caravan moved forward at an easy lope.

After awhile, Tlemsani, who had been left with the rear-guard, joined the small group formed by Morjana, the two Frenchmen and Ahmed.

"Riders——"

"How many?"

"Forty, more or less. The man Omar is in the lead. By his side is one who, from stature and bearing, is the little viper, Yusuf."

"What shall be done, Captain?" Ahmed questioned.

"Get the women and children out of range while we draw up to stop the path. We are too far from sunset to hope to avoid them until dark. Fighting must take place, and had best be done now."

Ahmed approved this suggestion, sent the main body on with sufficient guards, while the rest of the warriors, soon joined by the rear-guard of ten men, formed a long skirmish line. Carbine bolts flashed as each man assured himself his piece was loaded.

"Morjana," Lartal ordered. "Get back with the others."

"I am not afraid," she argued.

"Let her remain," Si Khalil said. "Omar will

hesitate to order his followers to fire when he sees her among us. The advantage of the first volley will be ours."

Lartal shrugged. He had come to know her spirit.

He glanced at the men high in the saddles.

"It might be wiser to dismount, men shoot better afoot," he advised Ahmed.

"The camels might stampede, Captain. And these are trained to be still. Behold them."

It could not be claimed that the animals were immobile, but by bracing the knee solidly against the pommel of the saddle one might obtain a reasonably steady aim.

The enemy, among whom could be perceived the bright cloaks of the *jemma's* cavalry, approached swiftly. El Hadj Omar in the lead. Lartal was compelled to grant that he sat a horse magnificently well for a Man of the Book. By his side Yusuf on a black horse brandished a rifle. The odds were not overwhelming. It was to be expected, reasoned coldly, that the Arabs of the caravan, constantly on the alert during their trips, would prove better shots than the men softened by life in the city. To Lartal's relief there were none of the stocky mountaineers among the attackers.

"A poor lot," he commented.

"If a craven's finger presses the trigger, the bullet is still deadly," Ahmed declared. "Thou, who dost know, tell us when to fire."

Lartal instructed the Arabs concerning the setting of the back-sights.

"Let no man fire at Yusuf. I'll drop his horse."

"He deserves worse," Khalil said.

Omar lifted his hand, made a sign.

Tlemsani laughed loudly: "Motion away. There are none of thy breed among us!"

The gesture was evidently meant to order possible members of the Senussis among the camel guards to drop out of line. No one stirred, save to bring the stock of the rifle to the shoulder.

"Fire when I do." Lartal took aim, and murmured: "Five hundred metres, three seventy-five, three hundred." He pressed the trigger.

A ragged volley hammered, in a dwindling crackle. Yusuf landed on his feet, raced after a riderless horse, mounted again, was coming on. Not for long, for he soon became aware that he was alone. Omar had turned back followed by his men.

"He is the only one who is not a coward," Si Khalil said with pride.

"Omar is waiting for the others to arrive," Ahmed pointed out. "He finds us waiting and he has decided he might as well gather his full strength before coming too near."

Thirty feet to the right, a camel fell, struck by one of the answering bullets of the *jemma's* men. The rider cut off the straps, lifted the saddle and pack on his shoulder, and stalked leisurely after the baggage train.

"Hell—" Lartal muttered, "if they kill off our camels——"

He turned to Si Khalil, but the old man had been speaking to Tlemsani. Tlemsani drew up beside Morjana, grasped her mount by the nostrils. Lartal was glad, for he believed that Si Khalil had decided to force her to go to the rear. Then suddenly, Ahmed cried out a warning. Si Khalil had left the line, was urging his camel forward toward Omar.

Si Khalil kept on, and when he neared Omar brought his right hand up, armed with a revolver,

fired several times. The Senussi slipped to the opposite side of his horse. For a moment it was uncertain whether he had been hit. Lartal saw the old Frenchman's intention: To behead the opposition by the killing of their leader. It was a strange spectacle, this duel, two tiny figures against immensity. Omar fired. Now Si Khalil was afoot, reeling. He sank to his knees, slid forward, lay on his face.

Near Lartal, there was confusion. Tlemsani was holding Morjana, Ahmed was preventing his men from running to Si Khalil's assistance. Lartal slid to the ground from the saddle, kneeled, aimed at Omar. His eyes seemed blurred, the front sight quivered continuously. Not more than a minute had passed since Si Khalil had left.

El Hadj Omar was no longer in the saddle. Lartal stood up, grumbled with satisfaction: "Got him—" before he became aware that he had not fired. Yet Omar was down——

"The boy shot him, Captain, the boy shot him!" Tlemsani cried.

Yusuf, afoot, approached the form of Omar. Fascinated, Lartal watched the lad's movements. Yusuf was bending, unrolling the Senussi's turban. His sword rose, fell. He tugged, one foot braced on the torso, reeled back. For an instant Yusuf held the head aloft, then tossed it aside. Horsemen hid him from view. Then he was alone again. The riders from the city were leaving, carrying the fallen on their saddles. Only after they were some distance away did the boy go to his father's side.

Fearing a ruse, Ahmed held his line in check.

"He ordered me to prevent his daughter from following him," Tlemsani said, as he eased the limp

body of the girl into the captain's arms. She had not fainted, but was sobbing, moaning:

"They've killed him, they've killed him. Why didn't you stop him?"

"I didn't realise, I didn't know—" Lartal pleaded humbly.

Long habit of responsibility had made him hold his ground, give the example of calm. A dash forward by even one other man might have precipitated everyone in the face of rifle fire.

"Let me go to him," she begged.

Yusuf was beckoning to them. After a brief consultation with Ahmed, Lartal took Morjana forward, escorted by four men.

"My father is not dead," he said. "But he is much hurt."

Morjana knelt beside Si Khalil, held his head in her arms. Lartal ascertained the location of the wound, found a hole in the right breast, a hand's breadth from the collar bone.

"That one is nothing," Yusef declared. "There is another in the belly."

He spoke the truth. There was but a slender chance of recovery, none if Si Khalil were forced to mount again.

"He must be still," he informed Yusuf. "Canst thou prevent the others from attacking us?"

"That is already done. They have gone and cannot possibly return until to-morrow, for I have told them to await orders from the city, as there is no longer anyone to command here. I killed El Hadj Omar," Yusuf grimaced, as if to prevent tears: "Not that I loved my father greatly. But he was of my blood. My honour would have been lost had I allowed my father's murderer to live. I

am told you Christians know sickness and wounds. Will my father live ? "

" A few hours, perhaps."

" If he recovers his mind tell him what I did." Yusuf mounted: " I am going back now. Farewell."

Morjana rose, and came nearer. Yusuf drew back, his lips curling in scorn.

" Thou wanton ! All this evil was brought by thee. Thou—" He expressed himself with a fluency worthy of a grown man, employed the imagery inborn in natives.

" Go," Lartal urged, very pale. " Go—a man should not speak thus."

" No," Yusuf agreed reflectively. " A man acts."

With a last glance toward his father, he rode away.

" What a charming child—" Lartal concluded.

Ahmed had come. The caravan was returning, for Tlemsani had signalled that it was safe. Men dragged aside the carcasses of dead horses, the head and body of Omar. Camp was established on the spot.

When Lartal had finished dressing Si Khalil's wounds, when the old Frenchman was sheltered beneath a small tent, he drew Morjana aside.

" You must have courage. If he opens his eyes, don't let him see you weeping. The last thing you can do for him is to forget yourself, Morjana."

She tried to wipe her cheeks, where the tears had streaked the bridal rouge. He moistened a cloth with water from his canteen. " Here, wash your face."

When Si Khalil recovered consciousness, in the first cool of the evening, Lartal and Morjana were seated by his side.

" We are free from pursuit until to-morrow morning, Si Khalil," the captain assured him.

" Omar ? "

"Dead——"

And when he heard what Yusuf had done, he murmured: "He's a good lad, according to his lights. What about me? Tell me the truth—and don't insult me by fearing to shock me—I'm done for——"

"I believe so. Intestine perforated——"

Si Khalil nodded, asked for a cigar.

"Just as well," he said calmly. "Though, with Omar dead, I'd have a chance to climb to the top again. Allah willed differently, that's all." He addressed Morjana: "You've got a good man, now. Are you satisfied? Good—I tried hard enough! There are a lot of things about Frenchmen which I meant to tell you. I haven't time. Try to find them out for yourself."

"He will teach me, Father——"

"Lartal—" the old man said softly, "forgive her—everything. She's strongwilled. I spoiled her. And, whatever you do, don't let her make you act against your better judgment. I mustn't say too much. Even a man about to pass out can make an ass of himself. I've settled the biggest problem, left you to work out your own salvation—" He was quiet for awhile, then asked for a match. "You may wonder why I rushed on Omar. To-day, we passed the spot where the three native soldiers of France were killed. You had forgotten, Lartal—When I gave the order to fire on Brangin's men I slipped from a renegade to a traitor—I cannot—go back." Through the cloth covering his abdomen the blood seeped, spread in a widening dark blotch with each breath:

"The candle is weak—not much like—the electric illumination you have in France—I hear—I had hoped——"

"Father—Father!" Morjana cried.

"Where are you, Morjana?"

She took his groping hand in hers.

"I am here, Father——"

"I have lived a full stretch—just a few years—a few years—not drooling in my beard—like Sidi Moussa." He seemed not to be addressing Lartal: "Hope it turns out for the best—no one can tell—not a path of roses.—There was Khadijah, and Morjana. The other one, and Yusuf—children of native women lost souls—" he rambled on. "Morjana, *a'hez tetti ouaret*——?"

Morjana answered him softly in dialect.

Charles Cabassot was dead.

.

Far off, above the cliff barring the sky, a ruddy glow dimmed the stars, the life of the city was going on, the steel workers were labouring to-night. Lost in the darkness on the stony immensity of the plateau, warriors of the raiding tribes were doubtless contemplating the reflection with tales of an enchanted mountain on their lips.

The fires in the camp had burned low. The motionless forms of the sleepers were scattered like corpses on the field of battle.

"Come away, Morjana——"

Slowly he drew her from the tent, sat down with her beside the fire, gathered her gently in his arms. The sobs shaking her soft body stabbed him through the heart. He had thought of her first as a girl, then a woman. Now she was a child, and he was appalled to find himself unable to take even a small part of her suffering. She lifted her lips to his. The kiss had a bitter taste, of tears, of death——

"You are mine now, Morjana——"

"Yours alone——" she replied.

CHAPTER XVII

SEVEN men were gathered around the table in the Tabelkala dining room.

Beside Lartal and Vasil, there were the members of the Geographical Mission : Brangin, in charge of the Military Escort, Professor Vautier, famous student and explorer, Captain Gieras, Topographical Service, Barbot, the replacement officer for the *Meharistes*.

" My first thought," Lartal said, in conclusion, " is to learn how I will stand with the Army authorities."

Vautier laughed : " No need to worry about that, Lartal. The Arab Bureau saw El Hadj Omar everywhere. The Colonel was pestered by dozens of circulars from Algiers, demanding action, Omar's arrest. Every small incident was attributed to him. Captain Gieras, who has a long arm at Headquarters, will straighten out the little matter of seeming disobedience."

" What about Ahmed ? " Vasil inquired.

" He declares himself willing to transfer his band into a counter-raiding unit. His veteran rovers can form the ideal irregular native force."

" Fine," Gieras approved. " I'll try to unhock a medal for Tlemsani."

" He won't appreciate the honour," Lartal said. " But he will like the small pension."

" By right, we should be angry with you," Vautier resumed. " You've made it evident that it would be unwise for the Mission to proceed to the Cliff. In a year or so, we'll try again."

"They may consent to converse with visitors, then." Lartal agreed. "The need for secrecy vanished with my escape."

"You can supply information for a map, Lartal?" Gieras asked, returning to his specialty.

"I have made a few sketches and I will give you the notes that I cleared up on the way back."

"Talk about fantastic reports!" Brangin declared.

"Depends on who writes them," Vasil said.

"Just the same, the captain played a pig's trick on me," Brangin protested. "Cut the grass right under my feet."

"He played fair," Barbot insisted. "Brought her back here. You have opportunity to win her favour."

"Lartal may be timid," Brangin exclaimed, forgetting to use the title in his animation: "But he has taken a long lead. The competition is no longer fair."

"There is no competition," Lartal said stiffly.

Vasil picked up the conversation: "Yes, what is to be done with Mademoiselle? I, for one, do not contemplate her sojourn here with calm. Our men will be cutting each other's throats for her glance. Even I might be tempted to enter the lists."

"That is all settled," Lartal announced. "I am going to marry Mademoiselle Cabassot."

"Well spoken!" Vasil laid an approving hand on Lartal's shoulder. "Fill your glass, Lartal, and drink to a lucky man—yourself."

Glasses were lifted in unison.

"Burglar!" Brangin accused. "Don't count on me for a witness."

"Vasil will do me that service, I hope——"

"I am honoured by the choice, but I cannot

accept. As Post Commander, it is my duty to marry you. I can't join the two functions—magistrate and witness."

"I thought I had to go north for the ceremony."

"Deaths, marriages, births can be registered by the Commanding Officer of an isolated Post in the Colonies. Both parties must be French. Mademoiselle Cabassot can claim our country. The banns must be published in the residence of those to be married. They were published in the City more than fourteen days ago. There is also the twenty-five days' notice to assure official authorisation. I authorised you twenty-five days ago when I gave my tacit consent. Halef, get the register from downstairs."

"You seem devilishly anxious to tie up poor Lartal," Brangin said.

"For his own good. Suppose he married a home girl—with his conscience! He would not wish to neglect her. And how could he leave the Desert? Morjana will be happy here, and he won't have the agony of being forced to choose between a wife and a camel."

Lartal's vague protest was lost in the general laughter.

"He can gradually fit his wife to become a colonel's spouse," Vasil went on. "In a short time the corruption will be accomplished, she will be fitted to flirt with young officers at tea. Moreover, I have a wedding gift.

"What's that?" Vautier asked curiously.

"I'll leave with the Mission. You'll become Post Commander, Lartal. Not only will that make you an impressive husband, but you can remain at your wife's side, leaving Barbot, your second, to pursue raiders."

Halef returned with the register, set pen and ink before Vasil.

"Anything to say before sentence is passed, Lartal?"

"No."

"Fine, Mademoiselle Cabassot is now in her apartment, getting ready to face admiring strangers, no doubt. Professor Vautier, your distinction, your deep knowledge of Arabic and Berber, all point to you as our deputy. Will you request Mademoiselle Cabassot to come here?"

"At my age," Vautier grumbled as he left, "one is only good to fetch and carry for others!"

Ahmed's women had supplied Morjana with garments. Framed in gold-embroidered silk, her face inspired the professor to poetic comparisons in Arabic. She retained her poise during the brief ceremony, save for a fleeting moment, when Vasil said: "Morjana, daughter of Charles Cabassot and Khadijah *bent* Moussa, an orphan." Vautier was pressed into service as her legal guardian. Brangin exacted a promise that she would never discard native garments for European garb before he signed, with a flourish.

Later, Lartal contemplated Morjana mutely. She seemed farther away from him, less his own. Jealousy of all others seized him, until he caught her glance. There was infinite love in her eyes, loyalty, a proud weighing of him against the others, an unreasoning belief in his superiority.

.

A cool wind swept from the far-off sea, the wind that had kissed the giant cliff across the Draa. The moonless sky, a spread of jewelled blue silk, suffused the terraces with an unreal, translucent azure glow.

Below, the fires of the guards at the Oasis were blazing, menacing orbs in the darkness.

"Vasil will be in Colomb-Bechar before long. He'll send the clothes he promised. Then, when my leave comes, we'll see France together. Will you be happy then?"

"I'm your wife. Where you take me, I will be happy."

"You can't talk that way and be a Frenchwoman, Morjana. You must have a will of your own. Lesson number one, remember: Disagree with husband on general principles." He laughed happily: "Otherwise it will be thought that I beat you into submission."

"I have a will. I want to be with you wherever you go." She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder: "Whether here or elsewhere, in your country, I am your woman."

He shook her gently, kissed her: "You little barbarian!"

"And—there are not other women here," she went on.

"Oh, that's better. Nothing Moslem about that!"

LONDON AND GLASGOW: COLLINS' CLEAR-TYPE PRESS.

NEW 7/6 FICTION

FREDERICK NIVEN

Author of *The Three Marys*, etc.

THE PAISLEY SHAWL

PETER CUNNINGHAM, a young Scots journalist, has written his first novel. He is awaiting the cheque for it and the inspiration for his next with the feeling that both expectations are in vain. Fortunately Helen is understanding. Even although she is his wife and this is a post-war story, they loved one another, says Mr. Niven. Then comes the letter from Hilda Perry, the poetess and brilliant woman contributor to the press on all the provocative subjects of the day. She is doing a series of articles on contemporary authors and wishes to include Peter Cunningham. Peter goes to Edinburgh and brings Hilda to his home in the Elwin Hills. It might so easily have been just another eternal triangle, but Mr. Niven's touch is perfect. His style is as reflective of every nuance in his characters as the lochs that mirror his inspiring hills.

PHYLLIS AUSTIN

Author of *Small Beer*, etc.

THE SLOPING GARDEN

SABBY TAKING, a lovable, temperamental child, is reared by elderly relatives in the seclusion of a backwater on the Thames. The story tells of her life in the sinister Georgian house and the bright garden that slopes to the river. The elderly relatives in the gloomy house clutch an undetected secret to their breasts, which is not discovered until Sabby leaves the backwater for the open river of Life. Love comes to her literally on wings and in the song of a bird. Her life is taken up with trying to cage the elusive Bird-Boy She passes through the gamut of human passions before she realiess that love can be caught and tenderly held but never caged for eternity.

NEW 7/6 FICTION

J. D. BERESFORD

Author of *Love's Illusion*, etc.

AN INNOCENT CRIMINAL

MR. BERESFORD has written a new type of detective novel in *An Innocent Criminal*. He has made the actual crime plot of secondary importance to his perfectly natural treatment of characterisation and general detail. His plot, nevertheless, reveals ten times more ingenuity than that of many books which frankly lay claim to nothing else. He simply weaves into the lives of ordinary, credible human beings, such a dramatic happening as we may read of any day in the press. Not once has he sacrificed realism to the unexpected, or probability for the sake of a telling situation. Mr. Beresford's unravelling of the mystery just as it happened, is a triumph of narrative restraint, which by its likeness to everyday life increases rather than lessens the reader's interest. Truth may be stranger than fiction, but this fictitious truth of Mr. Beresford's is infinitely more compelling than either.

ARCHIBALD MARSHALL

Author of *Miss Welby at Steen*, etc.

TWO FAMILIES

MR. MARSHALL'S new novel deals with the fortunes of two families through three generations extending over a period of fifty-five years. One, a land-owning family established in a large country house, enjoying the privileges of money and position, declines in wealth and power until nothing is left to them, and they have to begin again. The other family, which has worked on the land for them for generations, makes its way in the rising town nearby until it becomes as prosperous and respected as its one-time employers had been. Throughout, there is a personal contact between the members of the two families, as the one declines and the other flourishes, until at the end they are drawn together more closely than ever before. Mr. Marshall handles his interesting theme with admirable skill and restraint and presents a charming picture of English country life.

NEW 7/6 FICTION

MAY EDGINTON

Author of *Lamplight*, etc.

LOVE-GIRL

LOUIE SAVOY was just discovering the thrill of being a beautiful woman in a world of susceptible men. The realisation had come to her suddenly during a winter in America with her father, less than a year after leaving the convent school where he had kept her so long. It was all rather delightfully disturbing for Louie, and Susan Guelder, successful woman of the world, saw that life was going to be a rigorous game indeed for the "love-girl." Old Paul Savoy had two ideas—a big one—money, and the remnant of a youthful love for Susan. His daughter was to him merely a possible means to the more desirable end. He carefully flaunted her before his wealthy director, Sir Ben South, and Sir Ben was entranced. He wanted Louie; but so did young Worthing, to meet whom Louie had for the first time in her life disregarded her father's orders—and then there was Nash Tenville from the States. He had succeeded in interesting Savoy in a big money-making scheme, and here he was in England on the next boat, but not to talk business. He, too, loved Louie. Miss Edginton is quite unrivalled at this sort of story. She will catch your interest in the first paragraph and hold it till the last tangle in the love-girl's romance is happily straightened out.

KATHARINE TYNAN

Author of *Grayson's Girl*, etc.

THE FORBIDDEN WAY

CYNTHIA ROSEVEARE arrives in Ireland to take up the duties of "lady help" to Mrs. Harry Burke on the recommendation of Lady Sarratt, Mrs. Burke's sister. She finds a delightful home at Inishgolden, but not quite the happiness that such a home should bring. Mæve and Brigid, her two little charges, lavish on her all the generous love of childhood. She wins the hearts of the servants and finds a treasure in Kelly the butler, but Mrs. Burke is a selfish, pleasure-seeking woman who has lost the finer feelings of motherhood and that sympathetic understanding a husband has a right to expect of his wife. Small wonder that Harry Burke and Cynthia are drawn to one another, and such a friendship has but one ending—love!

NEW 7/6 FICTION

Mrs. Alfred Sidgwick

Author of *Six of Them*, *Come by Chance*, etc.

MASQUERADE

THIS is the story of the return of the Prodigal Son after his father's death to the property he now inherits and must control. The three women living in his house await him with varied feelings. His old mother, forgetting and forgiving the long history of his misconduct, takes him to her heart at once. The woman who hoped to step into his shoes does all she can to humiliate and harm him. The cousin he has never seen tries to keep him straight, and the neighbours, friendly and unfriendly, marvel at the change in him.

Katherine Haviland-Taylor

Author of *Pablito*

WHEN MEN A-WOOING GO

WHICH man would you win—if you were a young and a charming girl? The hurrying, sometimes ruthless American business man, or the Englishman of a satisfyingly pleasant code that has been bred in him by generations of gentle living? Cicily Eden didn't know where to find love; she hurt herself and others before the dramatic hour that brought truth home to her. But with the right man winning, the story closes on a hauntingly sweet note. Read this story to know a romantic charm that cannot be described.

NEW 7/6 FICTION

ROSE MACAULAY

Author of *Keeping Up Appearances*, etc.

STAYING WITH RELATIONS

THE central theme of *Staying With Relations* is that people are unexpected and difficult to know. If there is, in fact, such a thing as character, it is not rigid nor clearly marked nor according to type. In brief, any one may do almost anything at any moment and students of character are usually wrong.

Catherine Grey, a young woman novelist, had lectured on the Creation of Character in Fiction. People as such stimulated and absorbed this young lady. They were her hobby. She goes to stay with an American uncle and his family in a villa built on the ruins of an ancient Maya Palace in a forest in Central Guatemala. From the moment of her arrival, the story swiftly develops into a series of wholly unforeseeable and astonishing situations involving villainy, kidnapping, hidden treasure and an unfortunate love tragedy.

ERNEST ELMORE

THIS SIREN SONG

AT the age of fifty years Gibbons was an assistant at a chemist's shop near King's Cross. Insignificant, dyspeptic, and commonplace, he had become the slave of routine. To Gibbons, however, came the glimmerings of a great idea—a new source of motive power. The idea becomes a successful invention, which brings in its train wealth, power and social position. Then came a series of shattering blows, a complete reversion of fortune and—tragedy.

The theme of *This Siren Song* is the futility, or rather the danger, of success to people lacking the capacity to make right use of it. The crux of the narrative is summed up by Gibbons in the sentence at the end: "It's led me a pretty dance—all that thinking. Much better to have left it alone."

EDGAR WALLACE

THE CALENDAR

HORSE-RACING is Mr. Edgar Wallace's special hobby. Novel-writing is his business. When he combines the two we look for something great, and we get it in *The Calendar*. Garry Anson, the hero, is on the rocks. He repents of his unsportsmanlike action in telling Lady Panniford that his horse is not being ridden to win. Having no paper handy he writes the message on a hundred-pound banknote with a borrowed pencil, which happens to be indelible. Things and her ladyship conspire against Garry. His fortune runs out and he is debarred from racing wherever the Jockey Club holds sway. He must recover the hundred-pound note. It is snug in the safe in Lady Panniford's bedroom. Here Hillcott, a butler with a doubtful past, is consulted. The story develops with the vigour and thrills which Edgar Wallace can provide so brilliantly—all set against the gay background of Ascot society.

MAY EDGINTON

LAMPLIGHT

ALGIERS Palatial Hotels, white in the moon—palms—guitars and the lights of a yacht on the bay—such is the setting of Miss Edginton's latest romance. The love-theme is not the artificial intrigue of the wealthy cosmopolitan, but the full-blooded passion of two young Britons—Flora Towers, beautiful daughter of money, and Andy Court, a penniless son of the middle-class. He has followed Flora from Lugano, where they met one night by the lake. Now in Algiers they meet again. She thrills and yields to his kisses; but meantime a cloud has crossed her happiness. Cecil Towers, her father, has been at last ensnared by Annette—one of his many mistresses—who has married him. Under her jealous influence the father turns against his daughter, and Flora finds herself alone, but for the friendship of William Haagen, an elegant and very opulent adventurer. Is she to accept his luxury and sophisticated love or the sincere and simple devotion of her Lugano cavalier?